

THE CHINESE DRUGSTORE

TEXT
BY GIANCARLO LIGABUE
PHOTOGRAPHS
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Nelle pagine precedenti, l'interno di una farmacia cinese a Singapore. I denti fossili vengono conservati in semplici vasi di vetro oppure, nelle farmacie più lussuose, dentro vasi decorati con draghi d'epoca Ming.

Previous pages, Chinese drugstore interior in Singapore. The fossil teeth are kept in simple glass jars or, in more upmarket drugstores, in Ming vases with dragon decorations.

Try going into any Chinese drugstore and ask for some dragon's teeth. The drugstore may be in Beijing, Shanghai, Honolulu, New York, Hong Kong or Java. Wherever there is a Chinese community. The scene is always the same. If there are young girls serving at the counter, it is not even worth enquiring, but if there is an old man, you can give it a try. He will know where to find them in the storeroom at the back of the shop.

Made with the teeth, bones, pieces of skull and prehistoric animal horns, Dragon's teeth are humankind's oldest remedy.

They are normally kept in simple glass jars or, if it is an upmarket drugstore, a Ming vase decorated with dragons. The teeth come from extinct Plio-Pleistocene animals and so are a few million years old. Crushed to a powder and mixed with water and spirits, they are taken orally as a universal panacea for all ailments.

The search for fossils can take palaeontologists into the most disparate locations in the world - deserts, mountains, along the banks of the major rivers. But the most unusual place to find a collection of fossils is surely in a Chinese drugstore.

The range of medicaments used to prevent or treat the most common illnesses in the Chinese community

Sotto, a sinistra, Davidson Black, professore di Anatomia presso il Peking Union Medical College fu il primo ad identificare l'uomo di Pechino; a destra, Franz Weidenreich, eminente anatomista e antropologo, compì lo studio definitivo sullo stesso argomento.

makes up a collection worthy of a *Wunderkammer*, a *cabinet de curiosité*, or miniature natural history museum: dried lizards and frogs, antelope and rhinoceros horns, tortoise shell, corals and dried insects.

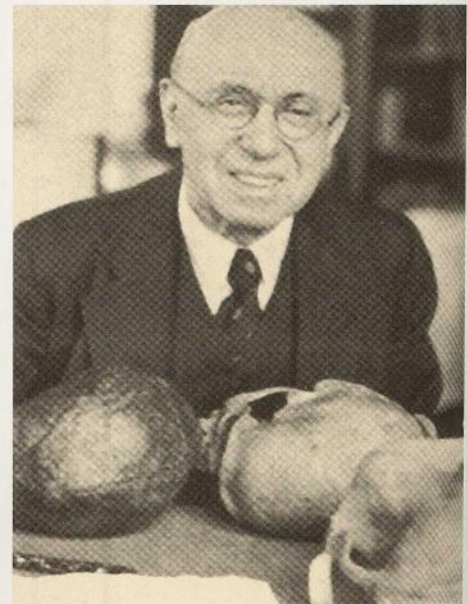
They can use up to as many 1,500 natural elements which, if properly used, are placebos for obscure illnesses, but especially for tuberculosis, rheumatism, neuralgia, dysentery, or as an aphrodisiac. The most prized teeth are those from the *Hipparion*, a small three-toed horse, which lived until 2 million years ago in



Below, left, Davidson Black, a professor of Anatomy at the Peking Union Medical College, was the first to recognise Peking man; right, Franz Weidenreich, an eminent anatomist and anthropologist who carried out the definitive study on the subject.

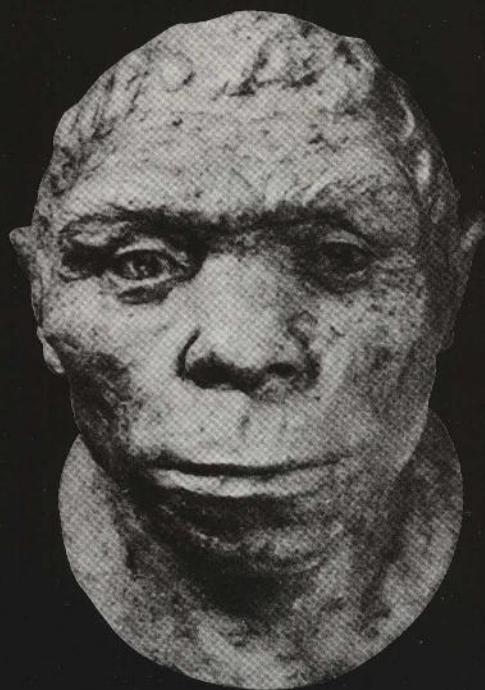
the Central Asian steppe. Overall the fossils found in many Chinese locations belong to large extinct species, such as various kinds of rhinoceroses, elephants and mastodons. Whatever was gigantic, personified the dragon and, therefore, anything from a terrifying creature of the past must have great therapeutic properties.

This fossil material is sold at a very high prices on oriental markets on account of their rarity and age. They then become an ingredient in a mix of natural medicine and shaman ritual.



Ricostruzione di Sinanthropus pekinensis
maschio, Medio Pleistocene, proveniente da
Pechino.

Reconstruction of a male Sinanthropus
pekinensis, Middle Pleistocene, from Beijing.



Zhoukoudian, Cina. Il professor Jia Lan Po, dell'Istituto Beijing per la Paleontologia e la Paleoantropologia dei vertebrati, con un cranio di *Homo erectus*. L'originale andò perduto durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale. (Da *Ecce Homo*, 2000, Kenneth Garrett, NGS Image Collection).

Zhoukoudian, China. Professor Jia Lan Po, from the Beijing Institute for Paleontology and Paleoantropology of Vertebrates, with a cranium of *Homo erectus*. The original was lost during the Second World War (from *Ecce Homo*, 2000, Kenneth Garrett, NGS Image Collection).

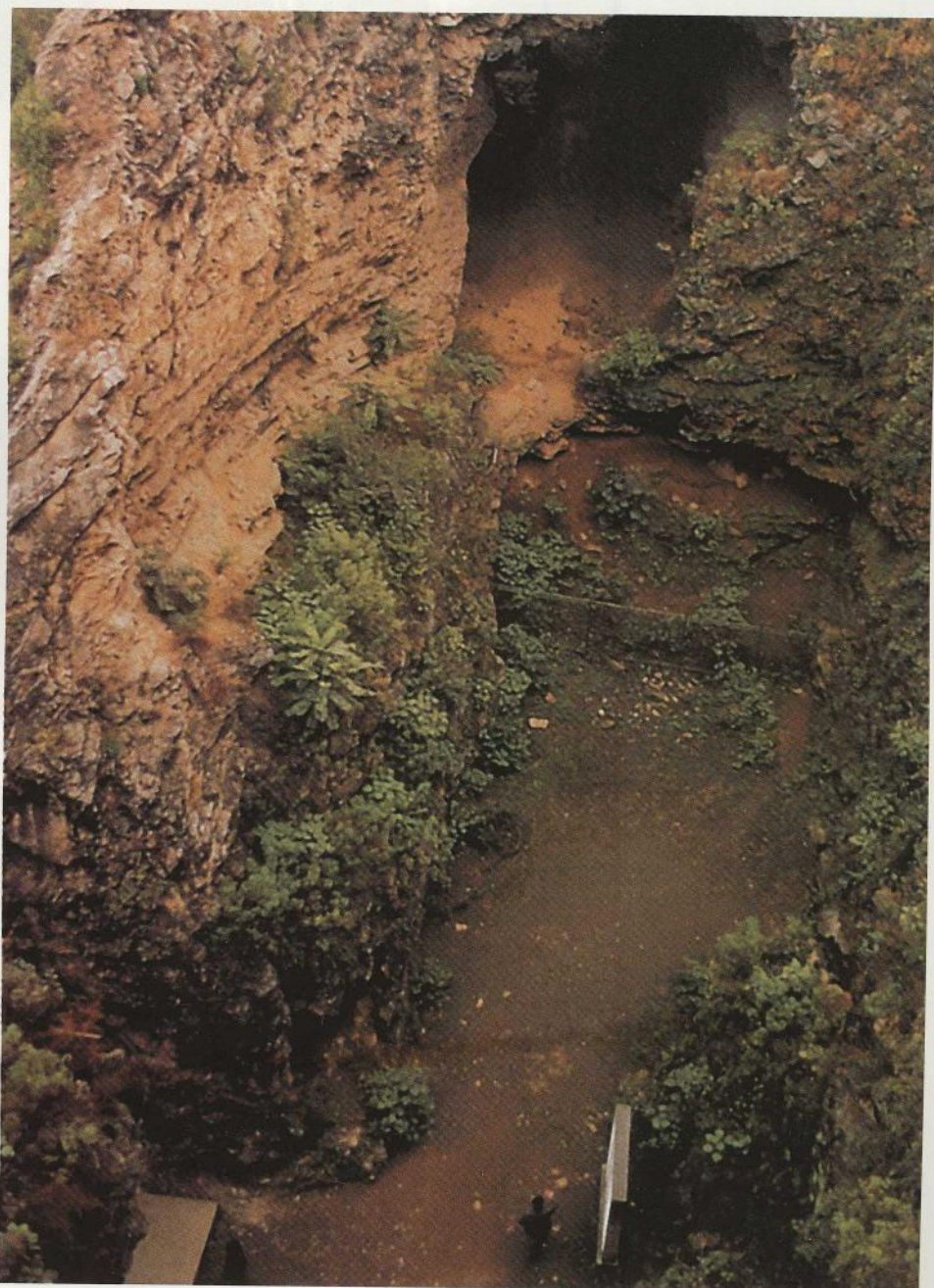
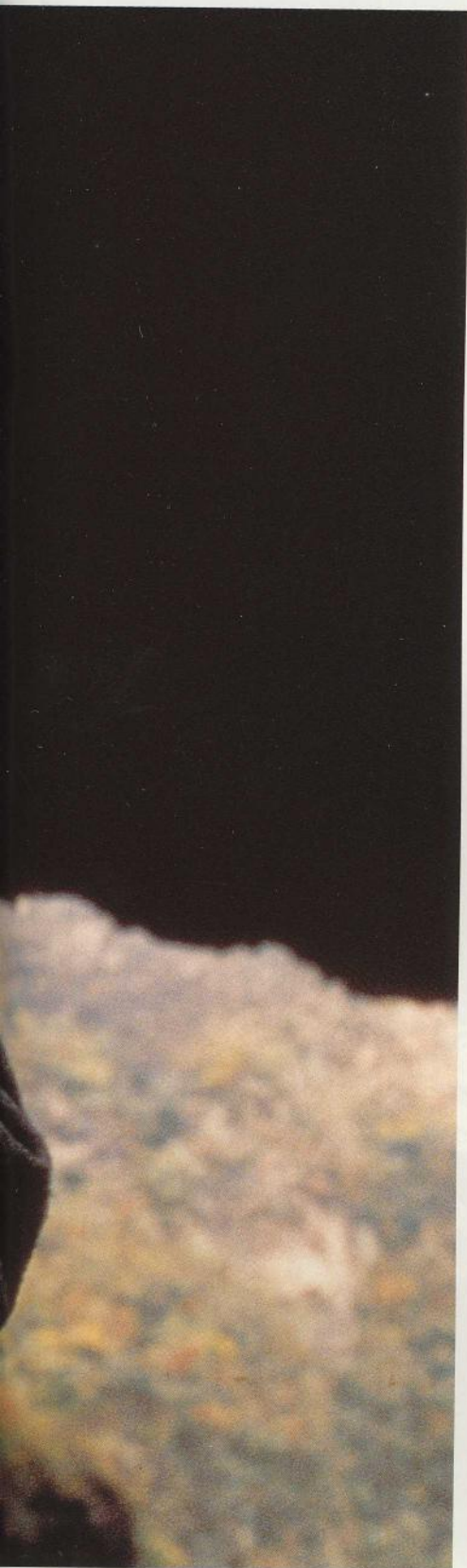


Zhoukoudian, Cina. La cava dove vennero scoperti i resti dell'Uomo di Pechino, Homo erectus. (Da Ecce Homo, 2000, Kenneth Garrett, NGS Image Collection).

Zhoukoudian, China. The cave in which the remains of Peking Man (Homo erectus) were discovered (from Kenneth Garrett, Ecce Homo, 2000, NGS Image Collection).

The collecting is done by Chinese peasants, who sell their wares through brokers to the drugstores in big cities. Unfortunately the real problem is that these fossils are dismembered, destroyed and crushed and therefore their provenance and scientific value are lost in the process of transforming them into therapeutic potions. There are two kinds of dragon's teeth: the first is based on the

fauna fossil of the *Hipparion* from Central China, with added rhinoceros, antelope and hyenas. The second dates from a later Pleistocene period and is made from stegodon, tapir, mastodon, orang-utan, and sabre-toothed tigers. Unlike in the West, in China the dragon is considered to be a benevolent animal and a divinity protecting water. According to ancient prehistoric tradition, the dragon





Pagina accanto, Singapore, un farmacista cinese espone sul banco lucertole, ippocampi e altri animali essiccati che saranno utilizzati per la preparazione di una panacea universale per le malattie più disparate.

Opposite, Singapore, on the store counter a Chinese pharmacist displays lizards, sea horses and other dried out animals ready to be used in preparing a universal panacea for the most disparate illnesses.

Sotto, raffigurazione di Huang Ti, detto l'Imperatore Giallo, autore del Nei Ching, uno dei più antichi ed autorevoli trattati di medicina cinese, 2600 a.C. (Da Archeologia dei medicamenti, Ed. Fondazione Marino Golinelli, Bologna).

was the son of the sky and emblem of the emperor. Gold dragons adorning temples, thrones and women's clothes are found throughout oriental iconography in all dynasties. Dragon teeth and bones were, therefore, greatly valued centuries before Christ. In the 5th century BC, Lei Hiao supplied recipes for their use. He described black bones as less effective, while those collected by women were useless.

"First boil the aromatic herbs. Wash the dragon bones twice in hot water, and then after crushing them to dust, put them in thin muslin bags. Take two young swallows and, after having removed their innards, put the bags inside the swallows and hang them up above a spring. After one night, remove the bags from the swallows, extract the dust and mix it. The effect of this medicine is almost miraculous for strengthening the kidneys."

In the early twentieth century, the recipe was simplified: according to G. Anderson, a famous Swedish geologist, all you had to do was crush the bones and teeth and mix them in a cup of tea. The medicine obtained in this way was a true universal remedy valid for a long list of ailments. In addition to malaria, women's illnesses and the kidneys, it was also the cure for cardiovascular disorders and anxiety.

From such varied fauna - a kind of Noah's Ark of extinct animals - we would also expect to find some human remains, since hominids also inhabited the Central Asian steppe millions of years ago and that environment made a key contribution to the evolution of the human species. Among the first to study the so-called "drugstore fossils" was Ralph von Koenigswald, a German palaeontologist and friend of Teilhard de Chardin, who, in 1936 invited him to Java, to search for the early *Homo erectus* at Sangiran and Trinil, along the River Solo. Attracted by the wealth of Asian fossil deposits, von Koenigswald continued his peregrinations by sifting his way through the drugstores in Java, Sumatra, Bali, Borneo, Celebes, Hawaii and even in

New York. His explorations in these pharmacies led him to discover cranium fragments and teeth attributed to a new hominid, which he baptised *Sinanthropus officinalis* ("Chinese officinal man"), a *Homo erectus* like the Java *Pithecanthropus* and the exemplar found at Chou Kou Tien, on the hills of the dragon, classified by Black as *Sinanthropus pekinensis* ("Chinese Peking Man").

During the Second World War a number of *erectus* craniums from China and Java disappeared and still have not been recovered, except for one found by the Allies in the Japanese Emperor's private collection after the war. But what about the others? Did they also end up in drugstores?

In a basket containing highly varied fossils with the remains of stegodons and elephants, von Koenigswald also found the teeth of an enormous primate, which he called *Gigantopithecus blacki* after his colleagues Davidson Black.

Only in 1958 did Professor Woo of the Chinese Academy discover - this time not in a drugstore but in a cave in southern China - three pieces of a jaw confirming the existence of the *Gigantopithecus*. This enormous creature is the largest primate that ever existed: with a jaw nine centimetres high and molars 2.7 centimetres long, it is reckoned to have been 2.7 metres tall and weighed 300 kilos. Having noted the more human-like features in his discovery, Professor Woo positioned the *Gigantopithecus* in the phyletic branch parallel to the australopithecines, the earliest forms of man. Its taxonomic classification, however, is still uncertain. Other findings of *Gigantopithecus* - whose first apparition was, however, due to the Chinese drugstores - was made by



Below, portrait of Huang Ti, called the Yellow Emperor; the author of Nei Ching, one of the oldest and most authoritative treatises on Chinese medicine dating from 2600 BC (from Archeologia dei medicamenti, Ed. Fondazione Marino Golinelli, Bologna).

E. L. Simons in the Siwalik Hills in India. Dating from 6-7 million years ago, they were considered as belonging to the earliest forms. The *Gigantopithecus* also fired the imagination of the press which associated it with the mythical Abominable Snowman of the Himalayan - the yeti.

Isolated in its "deviant" evolution among the permanent glaciers of the Himalayas, the yeti - according to the popular press - was supposed to be the last living specimen of an extinct species. But it is probably really only a political creature offering various neighbouring governments the pretext to send pseudo-scientific expeditions to chart the Himalayas, an area of crucial strategic importance. The impromptu explorations in Chinese drugstores have proved to be of much greater scientific significance: what for

non-experts was only an amusing pot-pourri of teeth and bones or for Orientals a therapeutic potion, provided scientists with a fascinating source of vital information, despite completely lacking in any features from the original context. Indeed, given the continual demand for increasingly fashionable alternative medicines, it's amazing that there are still any teeth and bones in the ground for palaeontological research dedicated to filling a new page in our forefathers' family album.

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Singapore. Un farmacista cinese mostra un corno di rinoceronte alla cui polvere vengono attribuiti effetti afrodisiaci.

Singapore. A Chinese pharmacist holding a rhinoceros horn, said - when crushed to powder - to have aphrodisiac properties.

