

Paleoanthropology and the Communist Agenda

Since the 1970s debates on human origins have grown increasingly heated among western and, currently, non-western cultures. Most scholars, either cultural historians, or paleoanthropologists generally maintain a Eurocentric inclination within those arguments. They are posited within the framework of the world of capitalism as part of a notion that it is only those types of governments with something at stake in the argument. Sigrid Schmalzer's *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth Century China* shifts that focus to a government with quite different ideas of the human condition.

Schmalzer's work illuminates the role of science, scientific discovery, and scientific dissemination in not only "top-down" politics and history, but also at the general populace's level. She attempts to understand what each of those qualities mean to each of those populations. Are science and popular culture forever at odds? With clear examples involving the Peking Man discovery as well as the popular belief in the *yeren* Schmalzer gives a clear answer: no. The two instances under investigation reveal what each facet of "knowledge" adds to the idea of what it means to be human. *Homo erectus* (Peking Man) as the exemplar of human progress on the one hand, while the Wild Man (*yeren*) representing either regression, or a return to nature and rejection of modernity on the other.

The book is divided chronologically with pre-Mao Chinese culture at the beginning, the Mao era taking the bulk of the book, and ending with the post-Mao ideas. This arrangement allows Schmalzer to show that scientific knowledge was not only used to provide physical evidence of Chinese ancestry. Peking Man made tools and lived in a communist society 500,000 years ago, in short, science was greater than superstition. This also provides a way to show how the physical gathering of scientific knowledge could also be presented as a "science based on labor... where shovels, picks, and wheelbarrows figured as

prominent tools of the trade” (140). Not only did the interpretation of a pre-Mao discovery suggest that China had always operated communistically, the very discipline of paleoanthropology reinforced it.

Schmalzer is one of the few authors than can pair a thematic approach with her chronological one. Perhaps this is just the nature of the subject, but it allows for the reader to follow the rise and fall of popular belief systems both at the top and at the bottom of society. Her ability to fill in paleoanthropological history and detail only strengthens her narrative. While this is neither a full and detailed account of paleoanthropology in China nor the popularization of science in China Schmalzer is able to include enough of each to sustain her explanations and revelations of scientific knowledge during the Maoist China as well as the periods before and after.

Paleoanthropology’s birth as a discipline with two focuses is a good model for a situation as multifaceted as the one Schmalzer investigates. The ability for the paleoanthropologists to overcome the arguments against their overstepping into the humanities and renegotiate their role as workers allowed them to remain at once specialists and the laborers that held special authority in China under Mao. That renegotiation of scientific identity is the most telling of Schmalzer’s research. The idea that scientific identity can be renegotiated and reframed in a new way with the same or even greater authority says much about the nature of science.

Not only do the bones of the Peking Man have political significance, but his discovery and interpretation do as well. This is the key to understanding the nature of science and scientific popularization. Peking Man was a tool maker who lived in a communal society and proved that man had progressed toward modernity. He was also a worker which proved that labor was the path to that modernity. Schmalzer could have ended with that, but she also included the ideas and arguments for just the reverse. The rejection of modernity and progress and the return to nature was embodied by the ideas and arguments for just the reverse. The *yeren* embodied this rejection and subsequent return to nature and by investigating the changing and modeling of the superstitions and the science together over the background of an ever changing China, Schmalzer is able to present a case of the importance of both in understanding what it means to be human, and how that idea has changed as well.