

Peking Man

by Robert J. Sawyer

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The lid was attached to the wooden crate with eighteen nails. The return address, in blue ink on the blond wood, said, "Sender: Dept. of Anatomy, P.U.M.C., Peking, China." The destination address, in larger letters, was:

Dr. Roy Chapman Andrews

The American Museum of Natural History

Central Park West at 79th Street

New York, N.Y. U.S.A.

The case was marked "Fragile!" and "REGISTERED" and "Par Avion." A brand had burned the words "Via Hongkong and by U.S. Air Service" into the wood.

Andrews had waited anxiously for this arrival. Between 1922 and 1930, he himself had led the now-famous Gobi Desert expeditions, searching for the Asian cradle of humanity. Although he'd brought back untold scientific riches -- including the first-ever dinosaur eggs -- Andrews had failed to discover a single ancient human remain.

But now a German scientist, Franz Weidenreich, had shipped to him a treasure trove from the Orient: the complete fossil remains of *Sinanthropus pekinensis*. In this very crate were the bones of Peking Man.

Andrews was actually salivating as he used a crowbar to pry off the lid. He'd waited so long for these, terrified that they wouldn't survive the journey, desperate to see what humanity's forefathers had looked like, anxious --

The lid came off. The contents were carefully packed in smaller cardboard boxes. He picked one up and moved over to his cluttered desk. He swept the books and papers to the floor, laid down the box, and opened it. Inside was a ball of rice paper, wrapped around a large object. Andrews carefully unwrapped the sheets, and --

White.

White?

No -- no, it couldn't be.

But it was. It was a skull, certainly -- but not a fossil skull. The material was bright white.

And it didn't weigh nearly enough.

A plaster cast. Not the original at all.

Andrews opened every box inside the wooden crate, his heart sinking as each new one yielded its contents. In total, there were fourteen skulls and eleven jawbones. The skulls were subhuman, with low foreheads, prominent brow ridges, flat faces, and the most unlikely looking perfect square teeth. Amazingly, each of the skull casts also showed clear artificial damage to the foramen magnum.

Oh, some work could indeed be done on these casts, no doubt. But where were the original fossils? With the Japanese having invaded China, surely they were too precious to be left in the Far East. What was Weidenreich up to?

Fire.

It was like a piece of the sun, brought down to earth. It kept the tribe warm at night, kept the saber-toothed cats away -- and it did something wonderful to meat, making it softer and easier to chew, while at the same time restoring the warmth the flesh had had when still part of the prey.

Fire was the most precious thing the tribe owned. They'd had it for eleven summers now, ever since Bok the brave had brought out a burning stick from the burning forest. The glowing coals were always fanned, always kept alive.

And then, one night, the Stranger came -- tall, thin, pale, with red-rimmed eyes that somehow seemed to glow from beneath his brow ridge.

The Stranger did the unthinkable, the unforgivable.

He doused the flames, throwing a gourd full of water on to the fire. The logs hissed, and steam rose up into the blackness. The children of the tribe began to cry; the adults quaked with fury. The Stranger turned and walked into the darkness. Two of the strongest hunters ran after him, but his long legs had apparently carried him quickly away.

The sounds of the forest grew closer -- the chirps of insects, the rustling of small animals in the vegetation, and --

A flapping sound.

The Stranger was gone.

And the silhouette of a bat fluttered briefly in front of the waning moon.

Franz Weidenreich had been born in Germany in 1873. A completely bald, thickset man, he had made a name for himself as an expert in hematology and osteology. He was currently Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, but that was coming to an end, and now he was faced with the uncomfortable prospect of having to return to Nazi Germany -- something, as a Jew, he desperately wanted to avoid.

And then word came of the sudden death of the Canadian paleontologist Davidson Black. Black had been at the Peking Union Medical College, studying the fragmentary remains of early man being recovered from the limestone quarry at Chou Kou Tien. Weidenreich, who once made a study of Neanderthal bones found in Germany, had read Black's papers in Nature and Science describing *Sinanthropus*.

But now, at fifty, Black was as dead as his fossil charges -- an unexpected heart attack. And, to Weidenreich's delight, the China Medical Board of the Rockefeller Foundation wanted him to fill Black's post. China was a strange, foreboding place -- and tensions between the Chinese and the Japanese were high -- but it beat all hell out of returning to Hitler's Germany ...

At night, most of the tribe huddled under the rocky overhang or crawled into the damp, smelly recesses of the limestone cave. Without the fire to keep animals away, someone had to stand watch each night, armed with a large branch and a pile of rocks for throwing. Last night, it had been Kart's turn. Everyone had slept well, for Kart was the strongest member of the tribe. They knew they were safe from whatever lurked in the darkness.

When daybreak came, the members of the tribe were astounded. Kart had fallen asleep. They found him lying in the dirt, next to the cold, black pit where their fire had once been. And on Kart's neck there were two small red-rimmed holes, staring up at them like the eyes of the Stranger ...

During his work on hematology, Weidenreich had met a remarkable man named Brancusi -- gaunt, pale, with disconcertingly sharp canine teeth. Brancusi suffered from a peculiar anemia, which Weidenreich had been unable to cure, and an almost pathological photophobia. Still, the gentleman was cultured and widely read, and Weidenreich had ever since maintained a correspondence with him.

When Weidenreich arrived in Peking, work was still continuing at the quarry. So far, only teeth and fragments of skull had been found. Davidson Black had done a good job of cataloging and describing some of the material, but as Weidenreich went through the specimens he was surprised to discover a small collection of sharp, pointed fossil teeth.

Black had evidently assumed they weren't part of the *Sinanthropus* material, as he hadn't included them in his descriptions. And, at first glance, Black's assessment seemed correct -- they were far longer than normal human canines, and much more sharply pointed. But, to Weidenreich's eye, the root pattern was possibly hominid. He dropped a letter to his friend Brancusi, half-joking that he'd found Brancusi's great-to-the-nth grandfather in China.

To Weidenreich's infinite surprise, within weeks Brancusi had arrived in Peking.

Each night, another member of the tribe stood watch -- and each morning, that member was found unconscious, with a pair of tiny wounds to his neck.

The tribe members were terrified. Soon multiple guards were posted each night, and, for a time, the happenings ceased.

But then something even more unusual happened ...

They were hunting deer. It would not be the same, not without fire to cook the meat, but, still, the tribe needed to eat. Four men, Kart included, led the assault. They moved stealthily amongst the tall grasses, tracking a large buck with a giant rack of antlers. The hunters communicated by sign language, carefully coordinating their movements, closing in on the animal from both sides.

Kart raised his right arm, preparing to signal the final attack, when --

-- a streak of light brown, slicing through the grass --

-- fangs flashing, the roar of the giant cat, the stag bolting away, and then --

-- Kart's own scream as the saber-tooth grabbed hold of his thigh and shook him viciously.

The other three hunters ran as fast as they could, desperate to get away. They didn't stop to look back, even when the cat let out the strangest yelp ...

That night, the tribe huddled together and sang songs urging Kart's soul a safe trip to heaven.

One of the Chinese laborers found the first skull. Weidenreich was summoned at once. Brancusi still suffered from his photophobia, and apparently had never adjusted to the shift in time zones -- he slept during the day. Weidenreich thought about waking him to see this great discovery, but decided against it.

The skull was still partially encased in the limestone muck at the bottom of the cave. It had a thick cranial wall and a beetle brow -- definitely a more primitive creature than Neanderthal, probably akin to Solo Man or Java Man ...

It took careful work to remove the skull from the ground, but, when it did come free, two astonishing things became apparent.

The loose teeth Davidson Black had set aside had indeed come from the hominids here: this skull still had all its upper teeth intact, and the canines were long and pointed.

Second, and even more astonishing, was the foramen magnum -- the large opening in the base of the skull through which the spinal cord passes. It was clear from its chipped, frayed margin that this individual's foramen magnum had been artificially widened --

-- meaning he'd been decapitated, and then had something shoved up into his brain through the bottom of his skull.

Five hunters stood guard that night. The moon had set, and the great sky river arched high over head. The Stranger returned -- but this time, he was not alone. The tribesmen couldn't believe their eyes. In the darkness, it looked like --

It was. Kart.

But -- but Kart was dead. They'd seen the saber-tooth take him.

The Stranger came closer. One of the men lifted a rock, as if to throw it at him, but soon he let the rock drop from his hand. It fell to the ground with a dull thud.

The Stranger continued to approach, and so did Kart.

And then Kart opened his mouth, and in the faint light they saw his teeth -- long and pointed, like the Stranger's.

The men were unable to run, unable to move. They seemed transfixed, either by the Stranger's gaze, or by Kart's, both of whom continued to approach.

And soon, in the dark, chill night, the Stranger's fangs fell upon one of the guard's necks, and Kart's fell upon another ...

Eventually, thirteen more skulls were found, all of which had the strange elongated canine teeth, and all of which had their foramen magnums artificially widened. Also found were some mandibles and skull fragments from other individuals -- but there was almost no post-cranial material. Someone in dim prehistory had discarded here the decapitated heads of a group of protohumans.

Brancusi sat in Weidenreich's lab late at night, looking at the skulls. He ran his tongue over his own sharp teeth, contemplating. These subhumans doubtless had no concept of mathematics beyond perhaps adding and subtracting on their fingers. How would they possibly know of the problem that plagued the Family, the problem that every one of the Kindred knew to avoid?

If all those who feel the bite of the vampire themselves become vampires when they die, and all of those new vampires also turn those they feed from into vampires, soon, unless care is exercised, the whole population will be undead. A simple geometric progression.

Brancusi had long wondered how far back the Family went. It wasn't like tracing a normal family tree -- oh, yes, the lines were bloodlines, but not as passed on from father to son. He knew his own lineage -- a servant at Castle Dracula before the Count had taken to living all alone, a servant whose loyalty to his master extended even to letting him drink from his neck.

Brancusi himself had succumbed to pneumonia, not an uncommon ailment in the dank Carpathians. He had no family, and no one mourned his passing.

But soon he rose again -- and now he did have Family.

An Englishman and an American had killed the Count, removing his head with a kukri knife and driving a bowie knife through his heart. When news of this reached Brancusi from the gypsies, he traveled back to Transylvania. Dracula's attackers had simply abandoned the coffin, with its native soil and the dust that the Count's body had crumbled into. Brancusi dug a grave on the desolate, wind-swept grounds of the Castle, and placed the Count's coffin within.

Eventually, over a long period, the entire tribe had felt the Stranger's bite directly or indirectly.

A few of the tribefolk lost their lives to ravenous bloodthirst, drained dry. Others succumbed to disease or giant cats or falls from cliffs. One even died of old age. But all of them rose again.

And so it came to pass, just as it had for the Stranger all those years before, that the tribe had to look elsewhere to slake its thirst.

But they had not counted on the Others.

Weidenreich and Brancusi sat in Weidenreich's lab late at night. Things had been getting very tense -- the Japanese occupation was becoming intolerable. "I'm going to return to the States," said Weidenreich. "Andrews at the American Museum is offering me space to continue work on the fossils."

"No," said Brancusi. "No, you can't take the fossils."

Weidenreich's bushy eyebrows climbed up toward his bald pate. "But we can't let them fall into Japanese hands."

"That is true," said Brancusi.

"They belong somewhere safe. Somewhere where they can be studied."

"No," said Brancusi. His red-rimmed gaze fell on Weidenreich in a way it never had before. "No -- no one may see these fossils."

"But Andrews is expecting them. He's dying to see them. I've been deliberately vague in my letters to him -- I want to be there to see his face when he sees the dentition."

"No one can know about the teeth," said Brancusi.

"But he's expecting the fossils. And I have to publish descriptions of them."

"The teeth must be filed flat."

Weidenreich's eyes went wide. "I can't do that."

"You can, and you will."

"But --"

"You can and you will."

"I -- I can, but --"

"No buts."

"No, no, there is a but. Andrews will never be fooled by filed teeth. Ever since Piltdown Man, filing is the first thing people look for when they see an odd specimen. And, besides, the structure of teeth varies as you go into them. Andrews will realize at once that the teeth have been reduced from their original size." Weidenreich looked at Brancusi. "I'm sorry, but there's no way to hide the truth."

The Others lived in the next valley. They proved tough and resourceful -- and they could make fire whenever they needed it. When the tribefolk arrived it became apparent that there was never a time of darkness for the Others. Large fires were constantly burning.

The tribe had to feed, but the Others defended themselves, trying to kill them with rock knives.

But that didn't work. The tribefolk were undeterred.

They tried to kill them with spears.

But that did not work, either. The tribefolk came back.

They tried strangling the attackers with pieces of animal hide.

But that failed, too. The tribefolk returned again.

And finally the Others decided to try everything they could think of simultaneously.

They drove wooden spears into the hearts of the tribefolk.

The used stone knives to carve off the heads of the tribefolk.

And then they jammed spears up into the severed heads, forcing the shafts up through the holes at the bases of the skulls.

The hunters marched far away from their camp, each carrying a spear thrust vertically toward the summer sun, each one crowned by a severed, pointed-toothed head. When, at last, they found a suitable hole in the ground, they dumped the heads in, far, far away from their bodies.

The Others waited for the tribefolk to return.

But they never did.

"Do not send the originals," said Brancusi.

"But --"

"The originals are mine, do you understand? I will ensure their safe passage out of China."

It looked for a moment like Weidenreich's will was going to reassert itself, but then his expression grew blank again. "All right."

"I've seen you make casts of bones before."

"With plaster of Paris, yes."

"Make casts of these skulls -- and then file the teeth on the casts."

"But --"

"You said Andrews and others would be able to tell if the original fossils were altered. But there's no way they could tell that the casts had been modified, correct?"

"Not if it's done skillfully, I suppose, but --"

"Do it."

"What about the foramen magnums?"

"What would you conclude if you saw fossils with such widened openings?"

"I don't know -- possibly that ritual cannibalism had been practiced."

"Ritual?"

"Well, if the only purpose was to get at the brain, so you could eat it, it's easier just to smash the cranium, and --"

"Good. Good. Leave the damage to the skull bases intact. Let your Andrews have that puzzle to keep him occupied."

The casts were crated up and sent to the States first. Then Weidenreich himself headed for New York, leaving, he said, instructions for the actual fossils to be shipped aboard the S.S. President Harrison. But the fossils never arrived in America, and Weidenreich, the one man who might have clues to their whereabouts, died shortly thereafter.

Despite the raging war, Brancusi returned to Europe, returned to Transylvania, returned to Castle Dracula.

It took him a while in the darkness of night to find the right spot -- the scar left by his earlier digging was just one of many on the desolate landscape. But at last he located it. He prepared a series of smaller holes in the ground, and into each of them he laid one of the grinning skulls. He then covered the holes over with dark soil.

Brancusi hoped never to fall himself, but, if he did, he hoped one of his own converts would do the same thing for him, bringing his remains home to the Family plot.

THE END

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A profile of Rob from Tangent concentrating on his short-fiction career

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