

FOSSIL DISCOVERY IN ASIA

The remains of at least three individuals were found by Chinese archaeologists at Maludong (meaning Red Deer Cave), near the city of Mengzi in Yunnan Province during 1989. They remained unstudied until research began in 2008, involving scientists from six Chinese and five Australian institutions, including La Trobe University.



The fossils are of a people with a highly unusual mix of archaic and modern anatomical features, and are the youngest of their kind ever found in mainland East Asia.

Details of the discovery were published in the journal PLoS One. The team has been cautious about classifying the fossils because of their unusual mosaic of features.

Dr Andy Herries—Australian Research Fellow and Head of the Australian Archaeomagnetism Laboratory within the Archaeology Program at La Trobe University— was one of the scientists involved in the recent excavations and research.

‘One of the biggest problems in understanding human evolution in East and S.E Asia is that many of the fossils have been found out of context, which has meant that it has been difficult, if not impossible to assess their age.

‘In contrast the Maludong remains were excavated from a small cave, whose deposition occurred over a short time period. As such, they are some of the best dated fossils from the region and date to a warm-wet phase during a period of quite rapidly changing climate at the end of the last glacial period 14,500 to 13,000 years ago,’ says Dr Herries.

Dated to just 14,500 to 11,500 years old, these people would have shared the landscape with modern-looking people at a time when China’s earliest farming cultures were beginning, says the

international team of scientists led by Associate Professor Darren Curnoe, of the University of New South Wales, and Professor Ji Xueping of the Yunnan Institute of Cultural Relics and Archeology.

A Chinese geologist found a fourth partial skeleton in 1989 in a cave near the village of Longlin, in neighbouring Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. It stayed encased in a block of rock until 2008 when the international team removed and reconstructed the fossils.

The skulls and teeth from Maludong and Longlin are very similar to each other and show an unusual mixture of archaic and modern anatomical features, as well as some previously unseen characters.

‘Historically, Europe and Africa have been the focus of intense international research regarding our human origins. However, due to Asia’s massive size and rugged terrain there is likely also a rich record of fossils still waiting to be found that will further overturn what we know about our evolutionary history’ says Dr Herries.

‘The Maludong and Longlin remains suggest that it is quite possible that small relict populations of humans from earlier migrations into Asia survived in remote areas until much later than previously thought”

‘The discovery of the Red Deer Cave people opens the next chapter in the human evolutionary story – the Asian chapter – and it’s a story that’s just beginning to be told,’ says Professor Curnoe.

MORE INFORMATION

Further information on research opportunities in the Archaeology program can be found at: latrobe.edu.au/humanities/areas-of-study/historical-and-cultural-studies/archaeology/research