Peking Man is a hominid of the species Homo erectus, discovered in the 1920s in Zhoukoudian, not far from Beijing (known then as Peking). Remains of more than 40 individuals have been found dating back c. 670,000–410,000 years ago, and Chinese researchers believe that the species intermittently occupied the area during this time, using stone tools and, in its later stages, controlled the use of fire.

The term Peking Man refers to a hominid—a species of the family Hominidae to which humans and their closest fossil ancestors belong—discovered during excavations that were begun in 1921 in Zhoukoudian 周口店, Hebei Province, approximately 50 kilometers southwest of Beijing. The area, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, has yielded remains of more than forty individuals dating back to 670,000–410,000 years before the present (an alternative dating puts the remains at 580,000–230,000 years ago), and Chinese researchers believe that Peking Man intermittently occupied the area during this time.

The excavations at Zhoukoudian were initiated by Swedish geologist and archaeologist Johan Gunnar Andersson 安特生 (1874–1960), who while working for the Geological Survey of China had shown a profound interest in surveying fossil deposits in China. He recruited Austrian paleontologist Otto Zdansky 师丹斯基 (1894–1988) of Uppsala University in Sweden to conduct the excavations. During the first year Zdansky found a humanoid tooth, and a second one in 1923, while working on Zhoukoudian fossils at the laboratory in Uppsala. The discoveries were not made known to Andersson until 1926, who then announced the new finds on 22 October of that year. The Canadian physician and paleoanthropologist Davidson Black 步达生 (1884–1934) of the Peking Union Medical College examined the finds and wrote the first paper on the new species. It was based largely on photographs and a written report by Zdansky and published in the journal Nature on 20 November 1926. After the announcement American paleontologist Amadeus William Grabau 葛利普 (1870–1946) of Peking University coined the popular name “Peking Man,” and Black gave the find its official name, Sinanthropus pekinensis, though it later was changed to Homo erectus pekinensis.

Joint excavations by China and Western nations were set up at Zhoukoudian. A third tooth was found in 1927 by Swedish paleontologist Birger Bohlin 步林 (1898–1990), and at the end of 1929, the first skullcap was identified by the Chinese paleontologist Pei Wenzhong 裴文中 (1904–1982). Based on the new finds, Black concluded that Peking Man was similar to Java Man, or Pithecanthropus erectus, a hominid first found in Indonesia in 1891. Both finds were later confirmed to be of the same species, and renamed Homo erectus. Erectus finds have also been made in Africa, and most paleontologists believe today that Homo erectus evolved and spread from Africa to Eurasia. During the Japanese occupation of China and World War II, the remains from the Peking Man discovery—apart from three teeth stored in Uppsala—disappeared in an
Peking Man had a long, low skull that was remarkably thick, with a large brow ridge above the eye sockets. Its brain size varied from 915 to 1,225 cubic centimeters, compared with an average cranial capacity of about 1,350 cubic centimeters in modern humans.

It used stone tools, as evidenced by the large number of chopping tools made of sandstone or quartz, and scrapers made of flakes of various sizes that have been found on the site. In 1931 Black reported the presence of what he believed to be burned animal bones and blackened layers containing quantities of carbon inside the cave deposits. Although no real hearths were found, it was believed that Black’s report indicated that Peking Man was able to control the use of fire. The evidence for this assertion was questioned in the 1980s and 1990s in a report by American archaeologists and anthropologists Lewis Binford and Nancy Stone, and later by a team led by Steve Weiner of the Weizmann Institute of Science in...
Israel. The first study did, however, acknowledge episodes of roasting horse heads in the later phases of the occupation, and the latter noted burned animal bones in association with stone tools nearby.

A theory that Peking Man was a cannibal that lived in a cave on the site was put forward first in the late 1920s by Henri Breuil 步日耶 (1877–1961) and in the 1930s by Franz Weidenreich 魏登瑞 (1873–1948), who continued Black’s work after his death in 1934. Weidenreich concluded that many remains found in the cave bore traces of physical wounds and that some of the crania seemed to have been broken, presumably to reach the brain within. Pei Wenzhong early disagreed with this conclusion and suggested instead that these skeletal wounds could have resulted from hyenas dragging their victims to the cave and eating them there. Pei’s view won fresh support in the 1980s and 1990s from research conducted by Binford and Stone, whose examinations of bite and tool marks on animal bones furthermore indicated that Peking Man was a scavenger instead of a hunter and that the cave mostly was occupied by denning animals. However, a cranium discovered in 1966 has recently been shown to have marks from stone tools, indicating that cannibalism in fact did occur. A long-held claim that Peking Man may have been the forefather of the people in Asia has been contradicted by recent DNA research.

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Further Reading