

Meen-mann Chang. Ed. 2003. The Jehol Biota. The emergence of feathered dinosaurs, beaked birds, and flowering plants. – Shanghai, Shanghai Scientific and Technical Publishers

Book review by I.J.J. Nieuwland



The discovery of the fossil-laden Jehol Formation (the *Eossetheria–Ephemeropsis–Lycoptera* fauna recovered from the Jehol Group exposed in the western Liaoning Province and vicinity, in northeastern China) has, over the past decade or so, proven to be one of the most significant events in modern palaeontology, in two ways. First, obviously, because of the staggering amounts of high-quality bird and dinosaur fossils it has yielded (see also our July 2006 Newsletter). These have rightly been the source of much discussion, and have arguably helped our insight into the descent of birds further along than any collection of fossils has ever done.

But the second effect is hardly less important: it has brought Chinese palaeontologists into much closer cooperation with their Western colleagues than was previously the case. Initially, this took the form of co-authorships. But over the last years, Chinese scientists have become more assertive and autonomous – a development reflected in the increase of their output in scientific journals. So it had to be only a matter of time before this book was published.

Make no mistake: ‘The Jehol Biota’ is a book that will look splendidly when parked on top of one’s onyx coffee-table. The price of the volume will put that of the table itself in the shade. This volume is aimed at those around that table, as well. For example, the mention of *Velociraptor mongoliensis* is followed by a reference to the film Jurassic Park, and the titles to the chapters are suitably dramatic (e.g., ‘Mesozoic Pompeii’).

The book is divided into chapters treating various groups of plants and animals, with the first two chapters introducing the specific circumstances of the Jehol Formation. Photos and drawings are exquisite, as is the production quality of the book as a whole – a fact reflected in its truly staggering price. A standard of luxury has clearly been the yardstick here. But, as said, the photographs are really magnificent. Moreover, they are combined and enlarged in a very useful way. The fact that the photographs take up much more space than the texts that accompany them, may be a sufficient argument to overcome the hefty price tag. Allow me to explain. Not everything is quite so shining when we open the book. This is an ambivalent book. Though squarely aimed at the interested layman, its language is sometimes so riddled with jargon that its target audience will find it difficult to understand. On other occasions, however, its language becomes decidedly more accessible.

The advertisement blurb states that “each of the remaining chapters deals with a particular group by leading experts”. However, it is the evident lack of these ‘leading experts’ that is very clear. No Phil Currie, Kevin Padian or Luis Chiappe are to be found here.

A final problem concerns the descriptions of the fossils themselves. Whereas some of the Jehol creatures have been the subject of much discussion (e.g., *Sinosauroptryx prima*), others are known only from brief descriptions of incomplete or ambivalently interpreted remains. Yet this difference is seldom made explicit in this publication. The Chinese have been rightly criticised (as have some of the publishing journals) for letting publication abundance get in the way of scientific rigour, and the *Archaeoraptor* fiasco may serve as a reminder of the dangers involved.

All in all a worthwhile publication for the interested layman who wishes to acquire a quite spectacular collection of photographs from the most prolific fossil site in existence. Just do not buy it for the text.

Meen-mann Chang. Ed. 2003. The Jehol Biota. The emergence of feathered dinosaurs, beaked birds, and flowering plants. – Shanghai, Shanghai Scientific and Technical Publishers. 208 pp. ISBN 7-5323-7318-5/Q 90. Price around € 150.00 (hardback; note that de price may vary).