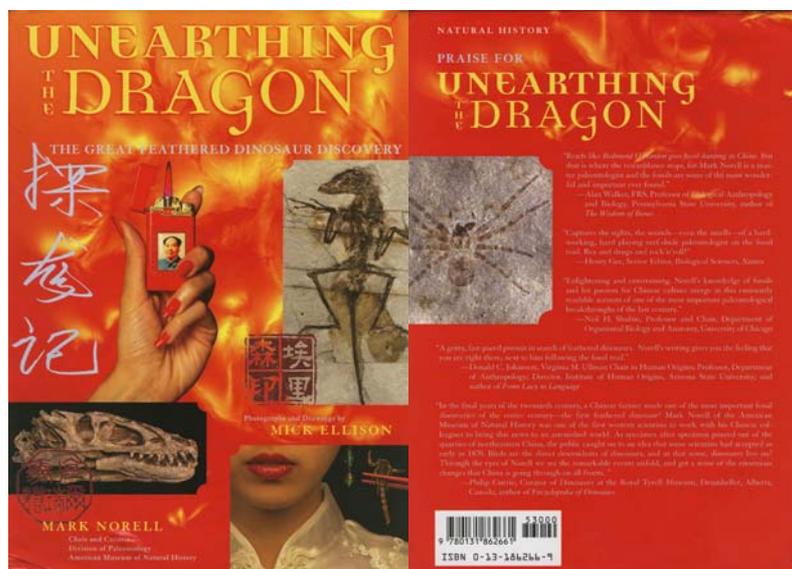


Norell, M.A. & M, Ellison. 2005. *Unearthing the dragon. The great feathered dinosaur discovery.* – New York, Pi Press

Book review¹ by X. Panadés I Blas



A book's title like 'Unearthing the dragon' sounds like a title from Adeline Yen Mah and her realistic accounts of her rather hard childhood vicissitudes in China. Only coming across the name of Mark Norell and Mick Ellison on the front cover you realise that the book is also about palaeontology.

The book's layout is as much astonishingly beautiful inside as outside. A reddish sleeve combining three cover photos of two fossils (stamped partially with Chinese post-like marks on), a woman's lips and chin, and a scorpion held by two chop-sticks; and just below the title a feminine hand holding an open red (for a change) lighter with a Mao Tse-Tung's smiling face on the front. However, its beauty contrasts with the total lack of environmental materials used by the publisher. Sadly enough, this is a common trend and mistake in most of scientific publishers including palaeontology to erroneously believe that beautiful books can not be produced using environmentally-friendly products.

It is a very broad autobiographical and narrative account of the spark and the main consequence (in the eye of the author) of the discovery of the first feathered dinosaur, the confirmation that 'birds are dinosaurs'. Hence, the title is very misleading, and it should be 'unearthing the birds', unless the author decided to use a more general word like 'dragon' encapsulating, dinosaur, birds and Chinese mythology.

The book kicks off narrating the presentation of the first feathered dinosaur by a Chinese scientist at the yearly meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Palaeontology meeting in 1996. From there the author, like Adeline Yen Mah, wisely introduces and builds a fairly complete detailed overview of the cultural, historical, and socio-political overview of the relations among USA and China, older and modern China, and the region of Liaoning province (where the fossil was found), in conjunction with personal experience and always comparing USA and Chinese culture, around the first feathered fossil. Though the author should have provided a less romantic picture of China, mentioning its constant breakdown of human rights and environmental issues.

Afterwards, the author steadily accentuates the palaeontological content of the book explaining the geology, the environment from the major fossil discoveries, including, plants, invertebrates and vertebrates unveiled at Sihetun (the quarry where the feathered dinosaurs were discovered).

Finally, the author spends the last part of the book explaining the evolution of feathers; how the diversity of fossil birds only uncovered in Liaoning beds has increased the fossil record of birds dramatically; the morphological clues to suggest that birds are the descendants of dinosaurs; and BAND (Birds Are Not Dinosaurs group)! The author dedicates a whole chapter explaining what is BAND, including its main members, and exposing and ridiculing politely each of their points against proposing that birds did not descend from dinosaurs. The author ends the book about talking about the many scientific challenges and discoveries ahead still to be made.

This is a well-written, detailed, and fair complete account of the historical, socio-economical issues that circumvents a single, but, one of the hottest, palaeontological issues, the ancestry of birds. Your personal view

¹ Second version, updated 4 January 2006.

about the ancestry of birds should not discourage you from reading this popular book. I would recommend this book particularly for a student from any scientific background. Through this book you realise the cornucopia of implications that a single issue in a scientific area could set off, including the dedication of a human life to study one its outcomes regarding whether he is right or wrong.

Norell, M.A. & M, Ellison. 2005. Unearthing the dragon. The great feathered dinosaur discovery. – New York, Pi Press. 224 pp. ISBN 0131862669. Price £21.99 (hardback).