

BY PHILIP J. CURRIE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOUIE PSIHOYOS

Red dust swirled as our van lurched up China's Green Dragon Mountain on a ride so jarring a door fell off. I didn't mind. I was preoccupied by the ovoid shapes I kept seeing. Surely too numerous to be fossils, I thought. Yet when we stopped, my fingers felt the unmistakable textures of dinosaur eggshell—not just single eggs but entire clutches. One egg was even used as a building stone!

Soon villagers crowded round our party. Through narrow streets lined by humble homes, children led us to still more eggs. Over the eons geologic forces endowed this region of central China with a great bonanza: fossilized eggs of incalculable scientific value and substantial monetary worth.

In 1991 a farmer discovered eggs while building a foundation. Villagers began selling eggs to collectors for a dollar apiece, a significant sum in backroads China. Soon even small eggs were fetching \$1,200 in North America. A nest of ten eggs was auctioned for \$78,000, part of a buying frenzy fanned by reports of purchases by celebrities such as director Steven Spielberg. Alarmed Chinese officials cracked down. Eggs were deemed “national treasures,” and customs officers seized thousands. Some smugglers went to prison.

It's not just an egg that makes my paleontologist's heart beat faster. It's the chance that one will contain an identifiable embryo. Only an embryo can positively establish a dinosaur's species, something that has been done only half a dozen times.

The study of embryos could reveal more about the link between the dinosaurs and their descendants, the birds. It could determine whether some dinosaurs were warm-blooded and how carefully they protected and nurtured their eggs and young. The most intriguing idea—cloning a dinosaur from DNA, a scenario featured in the book and movie *Jurassic Park*—is also the most outlandish.

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DINOSAUR DISCOVERIES

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