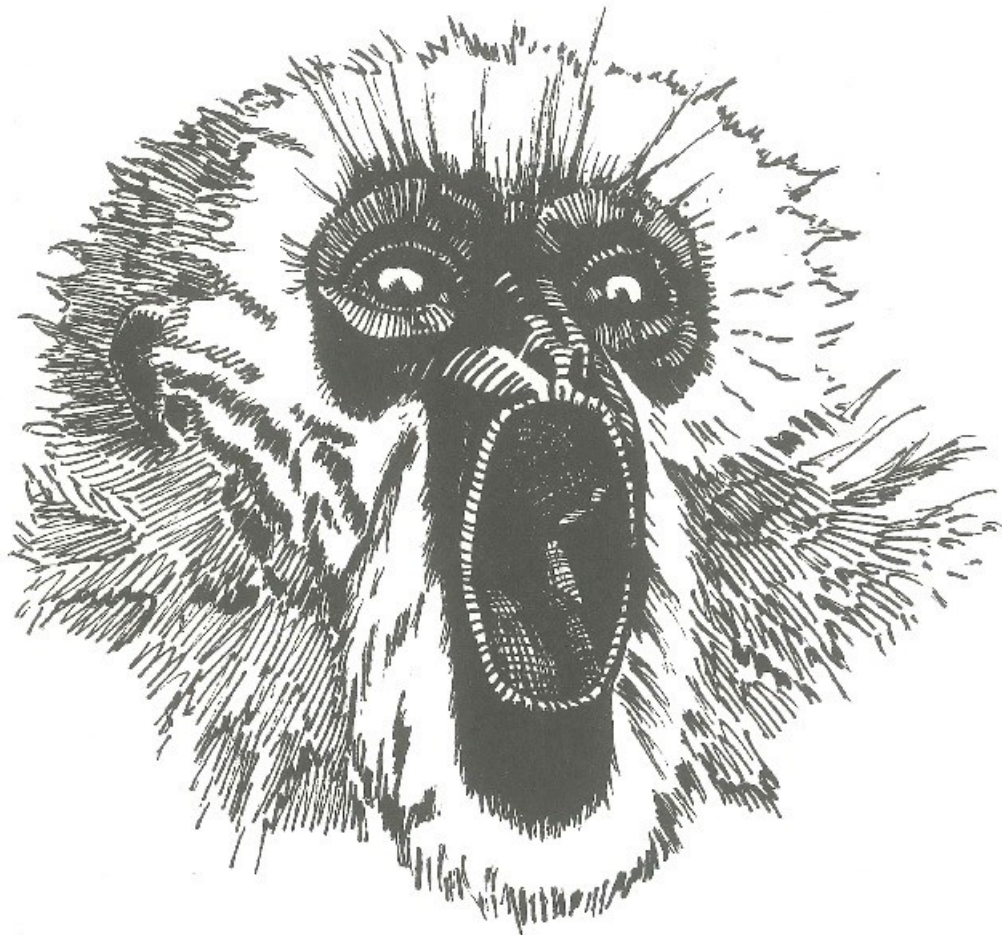


TALES OF THE GIBBONS

We present these stories, myths and legends to highlight the cultural importance of gibbons in habitat countries. We must start with a clear statement that consuming any part of a gibbon has **no medicinal value** and that gibbons must **not be kept as a pet** (it is illegal everywhere). So please do enjoy these stories, but remember they are just stories.



LINKS TO VIDEOS OF GIBBON SONG IN CONTEMPORARY ART

“Songs of Emzara” by ‘Dangerous Song’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMIs8ewTgFs>

CAMBODIA (Source: Naven Hon, Conservation International)

Kavet People from Ratanakiri province. The story of the gibbon calling (in their language the word "calling" means "crying"):

Long time ago, there was a family who live near the jungle, one day the kid (not sure boy or girl) asked mother, I was hungry, and wanted to have rice. The mother responded that, the rice was not yet, we needed to prepare plantation first. After the farm had been prepared, the kid asked again, could I have rice, the mother responded again, not yet. We needed to plant the rice first. Then the kid asked again, why it took very long time, can I have rice please, the mother still responded, not yet. We needed to pound the rice first. The kid though, it was very long to wait to have rice, so suddenly the kid took a bunch of cold rice and run into the jungle. The kid then lived in the jungle and became as a gibbon. Whenever the kid hungry, the kid remembered the cold rice, and then started crying (calling). The sound of the calling or crying (Ouk Koy, Ouk Koy), the Kaven translated as the cold rice (Ouk Koy Ouk Koy).

CHINA

长臂猿

Changbiyuan



**Painting by the Xuande Emperor
Hainan (Source: (Turvey et al. 2019))**

- People turned into gibbons:
 - (1) Children with nothing to eat go into mountains to find food (fruit) and turn into gibbons who do not come back down from trees; sometimes described as being orphans, or driven by wicked stepmother (who does not give them food, sends them to forage for food in mountains, gives them wood or faeces to eat, does not want children so sends them to mountains to get rid of them, or sends them to guard crops which are then eaten by birds so she withholds their food as punishment); sometimes their father wants them to come back to hug them but they refuse, or tries to persuade them to return home by pretending to be dead.

(2) Lazy or untalented people (e.g. do not know how to weave Li shirts), sometimes specifically referred to as 'primitive humans', exhibit behaviours leading them to turn into gibbons, such as want food without having to work, so pick fruits, making them climb trees, their arms grow longer, and they grow hair; run into the mountains, or go to mountains to pick fruit to eat; specifically told to go and be a gibbon if they do not want to work; steal corn or squash*; burned on backside to make it red*; make clothes out of fibres and tail out of cotton*; sometimes confronted by monkeys for appearing different, so made a fake tail out of squash (* indicates stories which appear to refer to monkeys instead of gibbons, but which the respondent specifically said related to gibbons).

(3) Before Communist Liberation of Hainan (in 1950), no-one cut their hair so they turned into gibbons.

- Gibbons turned into people: gibbons are described as human ancestors.
- Gibbons are unable to come down from trees because gibbon makes bet with another animal (either monkey or earthworm) about being able to come down to ground and other animal being able to climb tree; results in gibbon being killed or going blind if it ventures down to ground; sometimes other animal also dies if it climbs trees.



Yi Yuanji: Two gibbons in an oak tree.

Various Provinces (Source: (Zhang 2015))

Gibbon calls had been a vital aspect of Chinese classical literature with several authors making written observations about gibbons:

- Yuan-kang-di-ji (元康地記, ca 280–289 AD) noted “Gibbons and macaques do not inhabit the same mountain, calling each other at around dawn”.
- Yi-du-shanchuan-ji (宜都山川記, 401 AD) noted “the gibbon calls in SanXia valleys are so clear that they spread among valleys, desolate and never stop”, “gibbon calls in the SanXia valleys are sorrowful. Men cries after hearing the gibbon calls”.
- Shuijing-zhu (水經注, 527 AD), the chorography of Northern Wei dynasty, recorded gibbons in a variety of habitats. Gibbons’ behaviour was also recorded in some short tales of the six dynasties.

- Sou-shen-ji (搜神記, 336 AD) wrote “a man took a baby gibbon from nearby mountains; the next day the mother gibbon chased him to his home and begged the man for returning her baby”; “the mother gibbon died with sadness, and later the man’s whole family were sentenced to death by the society.”
- Hua-yang-guo-zhi (華陽國志, 354 AD) narrated “A gibbon was shot by a hunter. It extracted the arrow with its hand and put herb-medicine to treat its wound.”
- In the Bian-daolun (辯道論, 232 AD), the author questioned. “Are celestial beings macaques or gibbons?...Or are they common people who obtain occult power and become celestial?”
- Bao-pu-zi (抱樸子, 364 AD) noted “a macaque of eight hundred-year old turns to be a gibbon. A gibbon aged 500-year old turns to be a large monkey (Jue 獼). The large monkey can live for more than 1000-year old.”
- Shu-yi-ji (述異記, 508 AD) also noted “A gibbon of 500-year old turns to be a large monkey. A large monkey of one-thousand-year old turns to be an old man.” Both presented the gibbon as having longevity and being trans mutative.
- Shan-haijing-tu-zan (山海經圖贊, 324 AD) rewrote the story that Yang Youji easily shot a gibbon in the Zhou-Qin period: “The white gibbon knows the archer can hit a target beforehand, and find ways to avoid being caught... It means fate always changes in the world. Happiness sometimes might turn to be calamity.”

Source (Wenbo Zhang, Cloud Mountain)

The “elder ape” or the “elder gibbon” (the word “猿” means “ape” in modern language but since gibbon is the only type of apes in China, this word only refers to gibbon in historical literature) is the creators of the world, according to the legend of LiSu

In the history, almost every Lisu story telling song needs to start with a note called “木刮基”, telling the story of the old ape creating the world and everything that supports life.

PEI Aqian, the first minister of Nujiang Lisu Autonomous region, sang out the legendary creation story telling song “创世纪/Genesis” in May 1965. Thanks to MU Yuzhang who studies Lisu culture, recorded the song at that time and translated it into Chinese.

Following are parts from the Lisu version of “创世纪/Genesis”.

Niaqneitzeq nei jua dal nia (根据念妮正的传)

(Legends were recorded according to Niaqneitzeq)

Hainqtorla nei mal dal nia (根据藏兔鼠的讲)

(Words written down according to the Moupin Pika)

Mirmamot nei jeir nga jjot (老猿人是创造者)

(The elder ape is our creator)

Hainqmamul nei ggua nga jjot (野老鼠是发明人)

(The wild mouse is our inventor)

Matjeir peiq ma shit matjjox (没有哪种不创造)

(There is nothing he did not create)

Matggua peiq ma lat majjox (没有哪种不发明)

(There is no tools he did not invent)

The song continued to explain all the things these two legendary creatures did and taught our ancestors. For example, hiding from the wild beasts, crafting tools necessary for our lives, building shelters to stay warm in extreme weather, and thus human ancestors survived in the rough times of the old ages.

As civilization flourished, new languages were derived from those taught by the old ape and mouse. With plenty of tools for living, survival was no longer a challenge and the old creators were of no use to people anymore, so they were forgotten, weakened, and death followed.

According to songs like the “创世纪/Genesis” or “牧羊调/Shepard’s song”.

The elder ape created the world.

The wild mouse invented everything.

Because of raven picking acorns, acorns killed the elder ape under the pine.

While parrots pecking on the gourd, the wild mouse passed away next to the gourd tree.

(Details might not be exactly accurate, but the two legendary creatures both died without people’s notices.)

Similar to the Genesis story from the Hebrew Bible, in the Lisu legend, after the creator and inventor passed away, a global flood demolished the world and left none but two people to survive. The brother “莱飒/Lai Sa” and sister “青飒/Qing Sa”, brother and sister got married after the chaos and had seven children. Each child developed their own language and became ancestors for the seven races in China (Lisu, Tibetan, Han, Nu, Bai, Dulong, and Yi, all derived from the old Chiang race).

Gibbons traditionally had been a representative of gentleman like characteristic in Chinese culture, yet because of their quiet and gentle characters, their disappearance was exceptionally

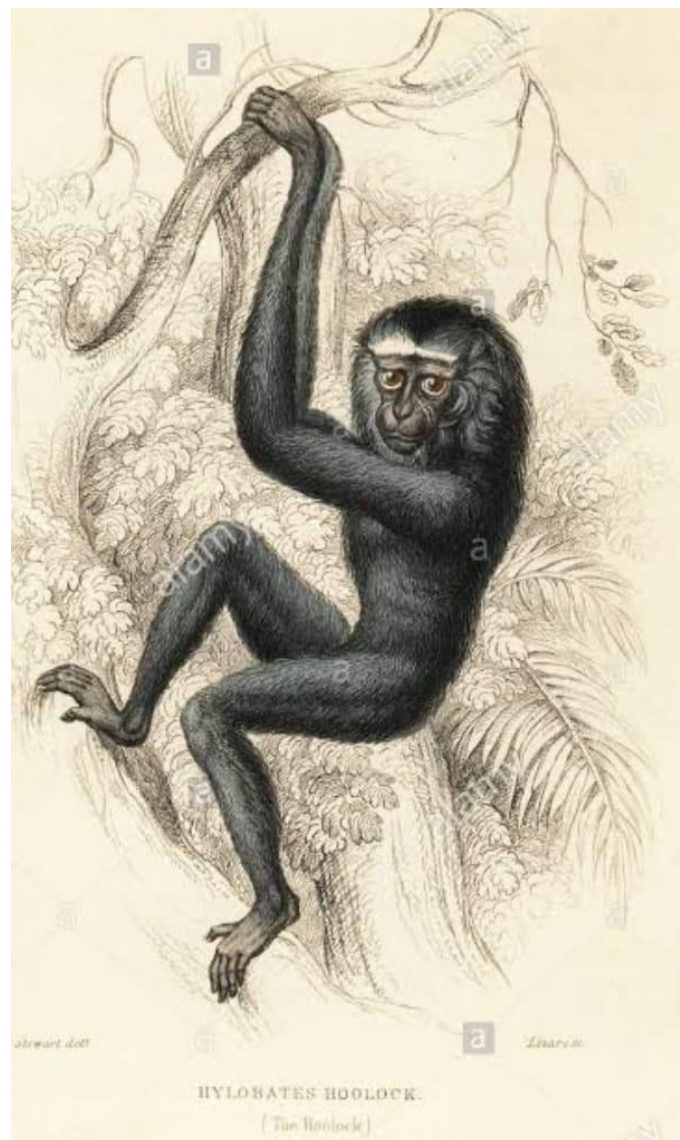
hard to notice. Only in a few parts of the country, the elders still vaguely remember the songs of gibbons, like songs about the stories of our creators.

INDIA (Source Narayan Sharma in (Daniel et al. 2007))

- In Rinsangri, the villagers in a small village in West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, believe that Hoolock Gibbons give a vigorous call if there is some festival or other ceremony in the village, but they become silent if somebody dies. This strong faith is quite evident here, resulting in a strong affection towards the Hoolock Gibbon. Though the children kill birds and other animals with the help of a catapult, Hoolock Gibbons never become the target of this mindless act. Gibbon call acts as a weather predictor! People adjacent to Rani and Gorbhanga Reserve Forest, Assam have a belief that Hoolock Gibbon call can forecast weather i.e., if Hoolock Gibbons call on a particular day, it can be predicted, according to some villagers, that the next day will be a rainy day.
- Some women in Ngopa village adjacent to Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary, Mizoram wear Gibbon bone on their feet tied with a thread. It is believed that the bone could cure gout and other inflammatory problems and make their feet stronger to sustain hardships of hill life!
- It is believed in Mizoram and Meghalaya that a Hoolock Gibbons call is dependent on the moon cycle!! ... people believe that if it is full moon, Hoolock Gibbon call regularly and more frequently during day time. The frequency reduces as the moon changes its shape and during New Moon they rarely call. Field Biologists have also observed this in the wild but it needs further research.
- In Dampa Tiger Reserve, people used to kill Hoolock Gibbons to drink the blood hot as they believed this would kill the malarial parasite.
- In Selbalgri, another village adjacent to Rinsangri there was a tradition of sacrificing Hoolock Gibbons and offering its head to please the forest deity. The small village forest is still present, but Hoolock Gibbons are not sacrificed anymore.

INDIA (From Florian Magne)

Villages in West Garo Hills, called "villages sacred Forest" believe that gibbon's calls are a good omen for the village. If the call is very near the village, it is interpreted as a sign of prosperity for the community. It is also believed that the gibbons remain silent when somebody dies. For this reason, the elders from these villages, including Ramwalkangre, where HURO Programme has its gibbon release site, will never hurt gibbons, and are very friendly towards gibbons. It is not true anymore for the younger generations though.



INDONESIA

Java (Source: Rahayu Oktaviani, Javan Gibbon Research and Conservation Project).

A short story about Javan Gibbons from local people around Mount Halimun.

The locals say if a Javan Gibbon sings, it means the gibbon is thirsty and because she cannot go down to the forest floor and river to drink, she will sing and ask the sky to cause the rain to fall so she can drink from it.

Java (Source Arif Setiawan)

Video Link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKIr53eVCFs&feature=youtu.be>

Kalimantan (Source: Susan M Cheyne, Borneo Nature Foundation).

How Gibbons Got Their Song

A long time ago there was a beautiful young woman who lived in a village. She was happy and would enjoy going into the forest to collect fruits. A much older man came to her and made her his wife, at first, he was kind and thoughtful, but after some time he showed his anger and he became mean. The young woman would seek solace in her trips into the forest.

One day the young woman met a hunter from another village, and they came to talk to each other and share their stories. And the woman returned to her husband a little happier. The next day she spent longer in the forest so she could seek out the handsome hunter.

As the weeks went by, the woman and the hunter would spend longer and longer together in the forest. But the husband became suspicious and he gathered his cronies and the next morning, they followed the young woman. And sure enough, she met the hunter. And the husband and his friends set upon the young couple and chased them. In the confusion the couple became separated. They ran and ran, calling desperately for each other. As the husband and his men close in, the Great Forest Spirit took pity on the couple and lifted them up into the trees. They were given long arms so they could swing between the trees, and the Great Forest Spirit gave them each a wonderful voice. So the couple became gibbons, and with their new songs, they would always be able to find each other every morning.

JAPAN

Gibbon Hanging - Edo period, 18th century.
Hanging scroll; ink on paper.

Hakuin was the greatest Zen priest-painter of the mid-Edo period, and famous as a vehement reformer of Zen practice in the eighteenth century.' He was active at the Shōin—ji, Hara, and the Myōshin-ji, Kyoto, where he served as abbot. He perfected a simple, refined style of painting with deceptively simple compositions, executed with great subtlety in the handling of ink tonalities. In this haunting work, a solitary gibbon stretches his hand toward an invisible moon, which, in the water's reflection, is not even there. "the gibbon's grasping at an illusion is mocked by Hakuin, who in his inscription names the gibbon Yoshida, a reference to the Zen monk Kenkō (1268—1350), author of the *Tsurezureg ysa* (essays on idleness). Kenkō's book is a series of meditations on the human condition and conveys a subtle degree of focus on the permutations of the human realm. Nonetheless, Hakuin found Kenkō's fascination with the fine points of human intercourse ridiculous, and far from the path to enlightenment. Hakuin's painting suggests that Kenkō's focus on humanity's foibles misses deeper ontological truths regarding the human condition. Hakuin painted numerous versions of this subject. In a similar hanging scroll in the Gitter—Yelen Collection, the inscription reads, "The monkey of Yoshida is no better than a fly's head."



LAOS PDR

For many ethnic minorities, gibbons and langurs (small apes and leaf monkeys) traditionally carried hunting and postnatal consumption taboos. Langurs were viewed as protectors of people as they gave warnings when big felidae (cats) were near. Gibbons were appreciated for their beautiful songs and seen as reincarnated ancestors. Only the more abundant macaque monkeys were regularly consumed (Krahn, 2005).

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MYANMAR (Source: (Geissmann et al. 2013))

Researchers have noted there may be a special regard for gibbons in Myanmar among the ethnic Kayin (= Karen), who claimed cultural taboos against killing gibbons at the only site in that state. Such informal prohibitions among the Kayin were also observed in one wildlife sanctuary

in western Thailand, where researchers “found no reason to contradict Karen claims about never harming gibbons”. They conclude that this special “respect” for the species may be due to observed similarities between gibbons and humans in the eyes of the Karen. In other parts of the country there is clearly a ‘hunting culture’ that appears to be strongly linked to ethnicity. The Lisu people, for example, are widely regarded (by others and among themselves) as great hunters, and large collections of trophies often adorn the walls of their homes. The Naga are also famed for their hunting prowess.

THAILAND (Source: (Raemaekers & Raemaekers 1990))

The Legend of the Singing Ape

Legend has it that this is how the gibbon came to be. There was a certain prince who studied under a hermit in a great wood. When his studies were complete, the prince left the wood to return to his own country to ascend the throne. As he left the hermit gave him a silver casket. “Now in this casket is a gift for you. But if you open it before you reach the safety of your kingdom, the gift will be lost to you”.

The prince thanked the hermit and vowed to do as the old man had said. He tucked the casket under his arm and set out for his kingdom. But the journey was a long one, and as the days and

weeks passed, the temptation to open the mysterious casket grew, until at last he could resist it no longer and drew back the lid. Out stepped the most beautiful woman he had ever set eyes on. At once the prince fell in love with her and when she returned his love, he took her to be his wife.

Then the prince thought no more of his country, and of the destiny which awaited him there, but wandered in idle bliss through the woods with his lady. But one day they were waylaid by a brigand, who drew his sword and told the prince to fight for the woman. They fought bitterly for an hour, at the end of which, the brigand with a great stroke dashed the prince to the ground, and his sword fell to the ground beyond his reach and near the feet of the woman.

“My love,” he gasped, “If you cherish my life, hand me my sword”. But the woman looked at the prince, and she looked at the bold brigand, and she left the sword where it lay. Then the brigand killed the prince and took the woman, who went with him willingly.

Now by and by the hermit came to the place where the prince lay dead, and he knew what had happened. Moved by his memories of the days teaching the young man, he breathed life into the body and forgetfulness of what had happened. As the prince rose up, the hermit withdrew unseen into the woods. But with the woman the hermit was moved to anger: he turned her into a gibbon, filling her with shame at her betrayal, and rekindling the flame of her former love for the prince. From that day to this she has roamed the forest in search of her lover, but ever in vain, and the mournful song that you may hear of a morning, rising from the trees, is her song of remorse.

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