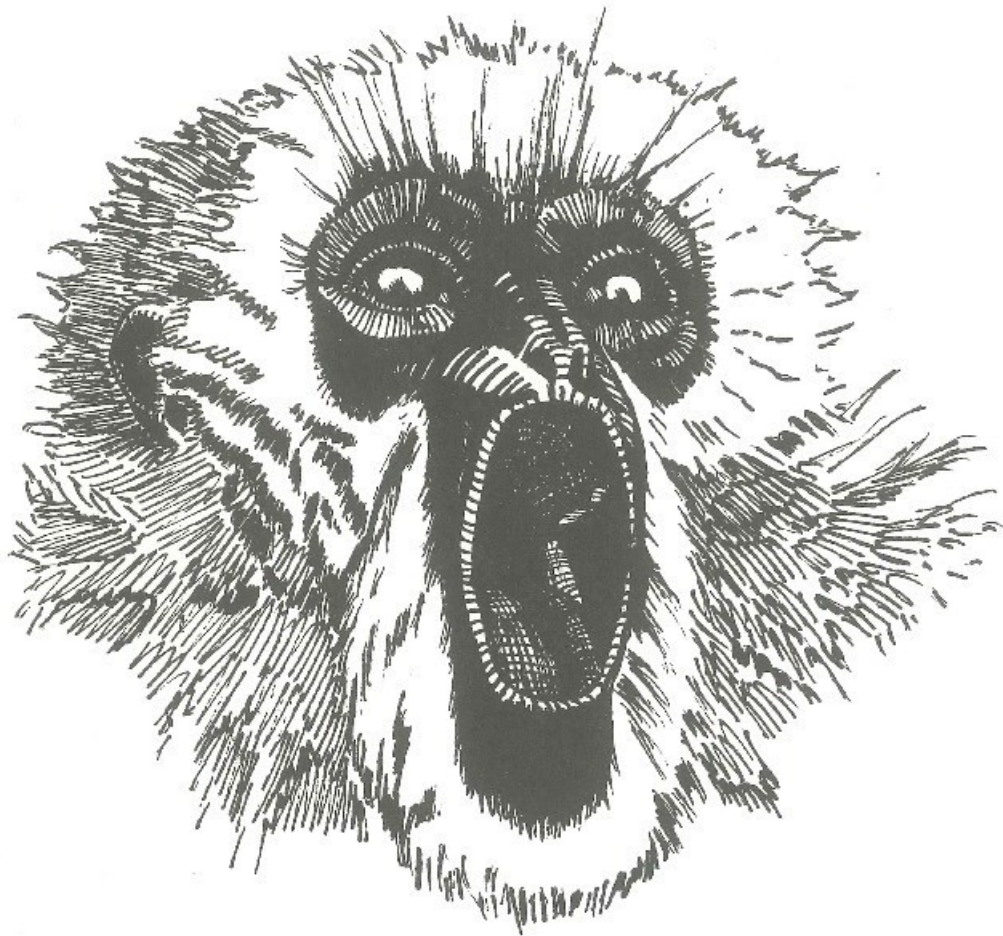


## **GIBBON STORIES, MYTHS AND LEGENDS FROM CHINA**

**Updated 11<sup>th</sup> November 2024**

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>

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.

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