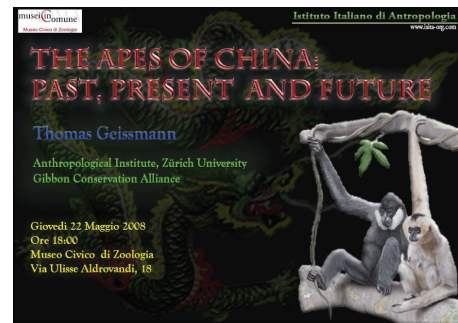


The Apes of China: Past, Present and Future

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Chairman: Spartaco Gippoliti (Istituto Italiano di Antropologia)



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Gibbons are apes and thus are more closely related to humans than to monkeys. Although roughly 70% of all ape species are gibbons or small apes, gibbons are, in most parts of the world, much less popular than their larger-bodied relatives, i.e. chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans. Yet, gibbons appear to have been the first apes to have had close relations with humans, and certainly have been the first to be made the object of literary and artistic compositions. In China, gibbons are rich in symbolic meanings and occupied a special niche in Chinese culture since more than 2,000 years. Their importance can be assessed, for instance, in the frequent depiction of gibbons in the figurative arts of China.

I will use artistic documents to reconstruct the past of China's apes, and results of field surveys in their last habitat forests to assess their present status. Finally, I will combine these data to evaluate whether the gibbons still have a future in China.

This is the first comprehensive survey of Chinese gibbon art. Over 600 gibbon paintings were surveyed. Gibbon-shaped objects are known from the late Eastern Zhou period (4th-3rd century BC), and the earliest gibbon paintings are known from the 9th century.

The production rate of gibbon paintings/time underwent marked, previously undocumented fluctuations. The two early production peaks in the 11th and 13th centuries mainly result from the output of two artists that specialized in depicting gibbons. Afterwards, gibbon paintings were produced continuously, but not frequently, until around 1900. The most dramatic increase in the production rate of gibbon paintings occurred during the 20th century. China experienced a previously undocumented and apparently unprecedented increase both in the number of painters that produced gibbon paintings, as well as in the high number of gibbon paintings that were produced by some specialists among these painters. This third peak appears to be continuing today.

The distribution range of the gibbons during the tenth century extended over much of China as far north as the Yellow River at the 35th parallel of latitude. While gibbon art began to flourish, Chinese gibbons lost most of their habitat due to habitat destruction and hunting. Today, gibbons occur only in few small relic populations limited to southern Yunnan, and one minuscule population each in Guangxi province and on Hainan island.

The future of the gibbons is uncertain. Five of China's six ape species are threatened by extinction, four of them critically. China's gibbons include the world's two most threatened primate species, one of them being endemic to China. This is the status as I summarized it one year ago. However, my recent gibbon survey in southern Yunnan revealed that the white-handed gibbon (*Hylobates lar*) apparently became extinct in China in the 1990s. This should be taken as an urgent alarm signal, because several other Chinese apes are on the brink of extinction. The white-cheeked gibbon (*Nomascus leucogenys*), for instance, has not been sighted in China since the 1980s. There are less than 50 Cao-vit gibbons (*N. nasutus*) left in China's Guangxi Province, and less than 20 Hainan gibbons (*N. hainanus*) on the island of Hainan, to name just the three most critically endangered species. Therefore, the loss of the Yunnan white-handed gibbon may be an omen of things to come, the beginning of an unprecedented wave of extinctions that threatens to purge out most or all of China's ape species. Unless immediate conservation efforts are taken to save China's last apes, they may only survive in the form of classical paintings.

