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Hominin Diversity in East Asia during the Pleistocene

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The study of human evolution in East Asia has attracted considerable interest in the last decade. The hominin fossil record from this region now indicates the presence of considerable species diversity during the Pleistocene. In fact, there would seem to have been more species of Homo present in East Asia during this epoch then have been described for Africa or Europe. Uniquely, hominin diversity persisted until the Holocene, demonstrating the coexistence of several lineages for tens of thousands of years. It seems that our species shared East Asia with at least four (probably more) hominin lineages, some until very recently. Some geneticists even think we may have even interbred with some of them, a hypothesis presently untestable using fossils. This paper explores the implications of this emerging picture of human evolution in East Asia. It also calls into question the prevailing view of palaeoanthropology, which has focused too heavily on Africa and Europe, and treated East Asia as an evolutionary backwater. Explaining the causes of hominid biodiversity and possible high endemism in East Asia remains a fascinating challenge.