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## “My Panda Family”

Stepping onto the pavement, I bolted. Running as fast as my tiny legs could carry me, I lept towards the number 14 enclosure at the Chengdu Panda Base. Dodging tourists, tired parents and ecstatic children, I ran up to the railing and attempted to grab the handlebar. Before I could even jump, I was picked up and strapped back into my stroller. Desperately, I thrashed around, trying to escape in order to join my black and white friends inside the exhibit. Giving up, I waved towards my large companions as my parents pushed me away. These are my earliest memories of pandas and panda-related Chinese culture.

Now, as I return to the Calgary Zoo, I reminisce about past adventures whilst visiting the establishment. As a regular visitor to the zoo, I am familiar with the location of each animal enclosure. Stepping past the recognizable stone wall lined with animal sculptures, I immediately head towards the newly opened “Panda Passage.” As I approach the tomato-red post and lintel paifang with a ceremonial moon gate, my heart beats in anticipation as I enter the exterior and interior enclosures of the “Panda Passage”. Once again, a sense of apprehension and excitement jolts through me as I prepare to greet my giant friends.

Peering into the first enclosure, I notice the first panda, Da Mao, leisurely chewing a bamboo shoot. Perched on a rock below a towering waterfall, the animal seems incredibly human as he continuously chews a bamboo shoot. His companion, Er Shun is nowhere to be seen, presumably sleeping. Watching the pandas gives me time to ponder. Why do pandas have black and white fur? Is it a

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deterrent to predators, or perhaps a cue for pandas to recognize one other? Why do pandas eat so much bamboo? Is it because they lack predatory abilities, or is it because of their body structure? Thinking pensively, I remember a fact I have read prior to coming to the zoo, “99% of the Giant Panda's diet is composed of bamboo.”

I considered the fact. Why would an animal bother to eat something that lacks so little nutrition? I look back to observe Da Mao who, at this point, is clumsily circumnavigating the enclosure. He stumbles forward, stopping in front of another pile of bamboo which he begins eating. I keep these thoughts in my head as I continue following the enclosure.

As I enter the outdoor enclosure, I notice what seems like two black blobs perambulating across the ground. As I approach the exhibit, I realize that the two blobs are, in fact, the younger pandas, Jia Yue Yue and Jia Pan Pan. Entranced, I continue to observe the two small pandas until one of them becomes tired and snuggles beside the glass wall to rest. As I observe the two juveniles, I ponder my relationship with my sister. Like most siblings, we do not get along. We are constantly involved in small skirmishes about trivial matters, such as who should use the computer first or who should be the last person to eat a cookie. Watching the two small pandas fight each other allows me to place our relationship into perspective. In the long run, whoever uses the computer first or eats the last cookie is insignificant. While contemplating this relation, I find myself thinking about my entire family. The relationship between the four pandas, Da

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Mao, Er Shun, Jia Yue Yue and Jia Pan Pan is akin to my own family. Just like Da Mao and Er Shun, my parents immigrate from China and move to Canada, where my sister and I are born. To me, pandas are like a distant relative. My mom always speaks about how she wishes she could be a mother panda, not needing to go to work but liesurely eating and sleeping all day.

Pandas have been a critical part of my identity. My relationship between the animal has increased my interest in Chinese culture and has assisted me to learn Chinese. Despite an obvious language barrier, my admiration of pandas have allowed me to connect with my friends and family living in China. Over the years, I've developed a personal connection with pandas, especially because my Chinese name, 团团 (tuán tuán) is named after arguably one of the most important pandas from China.

As a child, I've always been impressed at the speed of development of China. Each time I return, there is something new to see. Each city I visit has something new and unique. Gulangyu in Xiamen, the Yulong Mountain in Lijiang and the Forbidden City in Beijing ----China truly is a diverse country. Even though I am a Canadian citizen, seeing the pandas at the Calgary Zoo rekindles my respect for China, and has allowed me to reconnect with Chinese culture.

When one is asked about China, pandas are most likely the first thing that comes to mind. Pandas are one of the most recognizable

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animals in the world, due to their noticeable black and white fur and their representation in the media, specifically as logos for organizations such as the WWF. In fact, pandas are considered to be the most treasured animal in all of China, with a recorded history dating back to the Western Han Dynasty. Currently, pandas serve as a diplomatic link between China and the West. Whenever I see a panda in a country outside of China, I am reminded of my heritage as a Chinese person. As a native Canadian, it can be difficult for me to relate to traditional Chinese culture, but my love for pandas has streamlined the connection.

On the car ride home, I reflect on my trip to the zoo. I ask myself once again: why is the panda black and white? No one really knows for sure. Scientists have theorized that the different colors allow the panda to be camouflaged in different environments, others have theorized that the variations of color allow pandas to keep a steady temperature, or to make it easier for pandas to recognize each other. What I know for sure is that the panda is a mysterious animal, a mystery begging to be solved. *1026 Words*