

How I Treasure Our Panda Visitors

In the year 2011, my family moved from the Greater Toronto Area, where I was born, to Calgary. Shortly after our arrival in Calgary, I learned that China was to loan two giant pandas, DaMao and ErShun to the Toronto Zoo in 2013. Although the pandas would be coming to the Calgary Zoo in five years, I was sorely disappointed to learn that I would have to wait for a very long time (five years was almost my whole lifetime!) to see them. Pandas were one of my favourite animals, just behind dogs and monkeys, and I desperately wanted to see one for real. To make me feel better, my mom brought me to the library to borrow some books about pandas. I was fascinated by giant pandas and their enormous size. Giant pandas can weigh up to 100 kg and all they eat is bamboo! Their thick black and white fur looked soooo soft and lovely to the 6-year old me, almost like a gigantic stuffed animal. I longed, more than anything, to meet this majestic creature.

As I got older, I began to notice more images of pandas around me. Being a Canadian-born Chinese, pandas are culturally very important to me. When I looked hard enough, I realized that my house was filled with pandas. Just to name a few, we had bamboo fans with pandas embroidered on them, vases that portrayed pandas, and a painting of a panda portrait. One of my parents' wedding gifts was a charcoal painting of pandas titled "Pandas at Play" created by a famous Canadian wildlife artist. Even more importantly, the World Wildlife Foundation Symbol is

a picture of a panda. For the Chinese, pandas represent peace, harmony and friendship. Pandas are also regarded as national treasures to the Chinese because the giant pandas' only natural habitat is in China. To me, pandas are a very important creature and symbol to the world.

Finally, the two pandas, DaMao and ErShun, came to Calgary, along with their children, Jia PanPan and Jia YueYue. To my surprise, Calgary went panda crazy. Advertisements and images of the panda parents and young cubs were everywhere. This was quite a contrast from the regular images of oil and gas in this vibrant metropolitan. In May 2018, I was thrilled to hear some exciting news, all the Grade 6s in my school, along with me, were going to the Calgary Zoo. Upon arriving, we headed straight to the panda exhibit, Panda Passage, to see the pandas. The Panda Passage exhibit was packed with people. Spectators worked their way to the front of the crowd to get a glimpse of the pandas. Camera shutters clicked and lights flashed rapidly. When I was finally able to make my way to the front of the pandas' pen, I was extremely amazed. The young siblings, Jia PanPan and Jia YueYue, were less than a year and a half old and they were already so big! They tumbled over one another and rolled around playfully. They were so cute! While the cubs played, their parents relaxed in the shade and enjoyed their quiet time. When I got home that day, I retold my encounter with the pandas to my family and suddenly realized something. While pandas represent

peace, harmony and friendship, they also demonstrate to me what popularity means!

Pandas are very special, vulnerable animals that need to be forever protected. Today, there are only about 1,800 pandas alive in the wild. In order to try to save these wonderful creatures, more people need to learn about their threats and help raise awareness to protect them. It is an honour for Canada to enjoy the presence of the pandas. Visitors of the Calgary Zoo now have the opportunity to observe first-hand how remarkable these animals really are.

Hopefully, we as a caring society can contribute to the worthwhile cause of protecting the pandas. I am very glad that we have these treasured pandas in Calgary and I hope many more Canadians will have a chance to enjoy them and other animals at the Calgary Zoo.