
The Significance of the Panda

Now when you think of China, what's the first thing that pops into your head? Is it The Great Wall of China, The Forbidden City, or is it the adorable, woolly-furred black-and-white bears known as the giant panda. Like the other two world-class attractions, pandas are an unmistakable celebrity favoured around the world as a representative of China. Well, then that begs the question, what is the significance of the giant panda to the people of China?

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, five mascots were designed each symbolizing one essential quality of Chinese society. Within the Olympic rings, the black ring mascot "Jingjing" designed by Mrs Han Mei Ling is inspired from giant pandas and showcases the lush forests of China. Both pandas and Jingjing embody joy; they symbolize the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, even when times are tough. There is an old saying in Chinese "A remarkable place produces outstanding individuals". The same could be said for pandas, which inhabit the Sichuan, Shanxi, and Gansu provinces. Due to dehabitation, there are only around 2000 pandas alive and most of the remaining wild pandas live in the Minshan and Qinling mountains. These lands host many rivers, mountains, valleys and diverse vegetation, with the most prominent plant being the bamboo. Here, the temperatures are relatively stable, food and water sources are abundant and generally, the gentle slopes of the mountainsides are flourishing with forests of bamboo. A panda's craving for bamboo is insatiable. Pandas have a diet consisting of 98% bamboo,

and due to the low nutrients bamboo contains, they eat up to 12.5 kg of bamboo every day. This remarkable terrain right in the center of China is the only place in the world well suited enough for the giant panda to survive in the wild.

In addition, pandas and China have a similar past in terms of qualities and adaptability. The survival of giant panda is not accidental, but rather, due to their flexibility to change, and resistance to harsh climates. The giant panda is insensitive to cold temperatures and have been able to altered their diet and adjust from being carnivores to omnivores, to herbivores. The appearance of the panda is deceiving as even though it is slow-moving and covered with fur, it also has knife-like claws, sharp teeth, and a strong bite. In critical situations, the panda will even scramble up trees to avoid enemies. This aligns with China's peaceful development perspective. Both have strong regards in peace and freedom, yet won't stand any provoking and defend themselves and their beliefs without hesitation.

The giant panda has been an impeccable symbolic representation of China since the 20th century. The Chinese themselves appointed the panda as a 'GuoBao' or national heirloom, and pandas are portrayed as the nation's priceless treasure. This is largely due to the fact that pandas are exclusive to China. No wild panda inhabits any other nation on earth, even in China they are restricted to the southwest mountain ranges of China. Anything, if scarce is of value, not to mention the fact that pandas

are a remarkable scientific miracle. Unseemingly, as a species they have survived for at least eight million years. That is four times the amount humans have been around for. What's more is that it has been proven that the panda has barely evolved in basic structure, meaning that they have had minimal change since the beginning of their time. Studying the giant panda has given scientists and palaeontologists compelling insight on ancient species, habitats, climate and geographic changes, which have all hosted profound academic research value. Giant pandas are what is said to be “living fossils”. Now, pandas have become China’s symbolic icon, expressed to the rest of the world.

Historically, the panda has had a considerable place in Chinese culture. In the Shangshu (Xizhou Dynasty, 1027-771 BC) the panda was recorded as an invincible animal, as strong as the tiger. During that time, panda fur was also often given as tribute and gifts of good will. Many jade objects, pottery, bronze equipment, sculptures, and bronze mirrors of the Han Dynasty (206 BC to 22 AD) are decorated with bears. And during the Ming dynasty, the panda was often thought to have medical powers. Traditionally, giant pandas have represented peace and friendship and match flawlessly with Chinese values and worldview.

Furthermore, the black and white colour of the panda is very consistent with the cultural beliefs of China, specifically a connection to the Taiji Yin and Yang. Yin-Yang has immense influence on Chinese philosophy and the idea of dualism. The giant panda could be considered a physical

manifestation of the abstract Yin-Yang due to their colours of black and white, as well as the clear-cut contrast between the two. Both the panda and Yin-Yang shows the perspectives of opposing sides within the natural world and represents how the unifying of two mutually contrary attributes causes them to be complementary and interdependent upon each other. The panda's calm demeanour is an affirmation of how Yin-Yang, when perfectly balanced, can formulate peace and harmony even with the extreme contrasts between the Yin and the Yang. This correlates with the Chinese belief that all life is balanced as it hosts both the potential to be good or bad and both sides give rise to each other to combine, coexist and form the true nature.

In addition, giant pandas are the keystones of the ecosystem in which they inhabit. Naturally, pandas reside in the mountains of western China. This region is also home to a variety of wildlife such as the dwarf blue sheep, the multi-colored pheasants, the golden monkey, takin and crested ibis, many of which are endangered species and require appropriate protection. Pandas are an essential part of this ecosystem as they roam throughout the forests spreading seeds and facilitating greater growth in vegetation. Bamboo and the giant panda are interdependent upon each other - you could say they empower each other's survival. Therefore, when the giant panda is preserved, so is the surrounding wildlife and environment. The opposite is also true, to save the panda from extinction, the plants, landscapes and other animals that surround the pandas must

also be secured. The disappearance of any species has a dramatic consequence for those that remain.

Likewise, pandas also economically benefit their local communities. This region inhabited by pandas is also the home of millions of people, and making the land more suitable to sustain pandas will increase the living conditions for local populations as well. Pandas bring enormous economic benefits to these local communities through ecotourism and other complementary, nature-related activities due to the increase in globalization. The mountains of the wild pandas also form the watershed for the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, which are the economic arteries of China. This makes up for the costs of preserving the panda, and gives back to both the community and the country.

Finally, giant panda are also the cuddliest foreign diplomatists of China, they have been known as China's "friendly ambassador". At the moment, about 27 pandas are living outside of China as gifts of friendship and benevolence. Pandas have repeatedly travelled abroad as friendly delegates and made an indelible contribution to the development of friendly relationships between foreign nations, The giant panda has been seen in almost every major country in the world, and overtime, they have become a witness to the development of partnerships between China and foreign nations, as wells as the expansion of global trade and globalization. For example, on March 19th 2019, the two panda twins, "Jia Pan Pan" and "Jia Yue Yue", and their parents "Da Mao" and "Er

Shun" were moved from Toronto to Calgary. The giant pandas "Da Mao" and "Er Shun" came to Canada on March 25, 2013 and according to the agreement between China and Canada, they will live in both Toronto and Calgary for five years. These giant panda have actively promoted friendship and mutual understanding between Canada and China.

The giant panda and the ecosystem it occupies is an extremely valuable heritage of nature for the world. Pandas have imperative academic value, and to the Chinese, pandas are the emblem of their history, cultural values, and present day foreign policy. It has been unquestionably difficult to raise pandas in captivity and their low birth rates are detrimental to attempts at revitalization. As result of farming, deforestation, and other development tactics pandas have been driven out of the areas where they once lived. The fundamental measures to protect the giant pandas against extinction include protecting habitats, promoting the breeding of wild pandas, and improving and strengthening scientific methods. Quantity and development creates the fundamental conditions for the restoration of giant panda populations, and undoubtedly, this can only be achievable through the cooperation of all nation citizens. "We should do everything we can to save the giant panda because we are the ones that have driven it to the edge of extinction. And because we can, we will." (WWF, 2019)