

"If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie."— Anonymous¹

It was April 20, 1972. Over 8,000 Americans waited in the rain for the arrival of a special gift from China. A hermit nation under Communist rule for over two decades, China's first opening up to the West was accompanied by two pandas, Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing, to commemorate President Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing.² Though a symbolic moment of panda diplomacy, this was neither the first nor the last time China sent pandas to foreign zoos. Cuddly, fuzzy, with a distinctive black and white coat, China used the wholesome image of pandas in the past seven decades to expand its soft powers. Panda diplomacy, coupled with the recent elevation of the pandas to a national symbol, reflects China's disadvantageous political position in the twentieth century and its need to appease foreign preferences in public diplomacy. China's use of panda diplomacy is a legacy of twentieth-century cultural colonialism. By rewriting panda's cultural history, a stronger present-day China hopes to use a newer, more confident image of pandas to suit its propaganda internally and abroad.

The Role of Pandas in Chinese Culture Ere Globalization

Because they are only found within the vast mountain ranges of Sichuan, within the boundaries of the Middle Kingdom, pandas are often associated with China's ancient cultural heritage. The Chinese Academy of Sciences claims that, as early as four thousand years ago, trained pandas (*Pixius* in Classical Chinese) took part in Emperor Huangdi's ancient campaigns against other tribes. It would appear as common sense to many, including academic researchers,

that panda diplomacy emanated from China's "vast and unique culture." Yet, for most of antiquity, traces of pandas were not seen in China's myriad paintings, sculptures, and various artifacts. Although the Chinese academia currently associates several mythical beasts in classical Chinese literature with pandas, most of their conclusions about the historical significance of pandas are contestable. In truth, pandas were popularized in the early twentieth century by Western explorers; China gradually adopted them into its culture and evolved their use in public diplomacy.

While pandas wandered Sichuan's uncharted mountains eight million years longer than humans, for the majority of Chinese history, "the black and white bear" was unknown outside of southwest China and veiled even from locals. Sichuan, though valued by imperial China for its ample agricultural resources and geopolitical advantages, was culturally isolated from mainstream China. In "Ode to Hard Roads to Sichuan," the poet Li Bai once exclaimed that "the road to Shu [modern Sichuan] is harder than scaling the sky afar!" Deep in the mountains, pandas freely roamed in seclusion. Though unique to Sichuan and its subculture, pandas never represented mainstream Chinese culture. Alexa Olesen at the University of Chicago clarifies that "China's love affair with the panda is, in fact, a fairly recent phenomenon... the elevation of [pandas] to China's national symbol happened gradually only over the last century."

When Pandas First Became China's National Animal

In the near-modern era, pandas became a symbol of China under Western influence. The first documented discovery of pandas in the West was by the French Catholic Missionary Jean Pierre Armand David, who, in 1869, received a panda carcass from local Sichuan hunters and brought the specimen back to Europe. Following the initial discovery, early 1920s adventurers

from the US and Europe traveled to China to hunt and smuggle live pandas and specimens back to museums. Kermit and Theodore Roosvelt Jr., President Theodore Roosevelt's two sons, recorded their 1928 journeys hunting down a giant panda in Sichuan. In 1936, fashion designer Ruth Harkness smuggled two panda cubs back to the US on airplanes. Named the "pride of the Chicago Zoo," pandas first became a sensation in the West before they were known to most in China (See Appendix A). Under the burdens of civil wars and external threats, China could not even set up railroads in Sichuan for human transportation. Western fascination with pandas continued into the next several decades, as the news media was amazed by their long-standing existence. and intrigued by the little changes in their health and well-being.

On the basis of Western fascination with pandas, the First Lady of the Republic of China, Soong Mei-ling, during her 1941 lobbying tour, gifted two pandas, Pan-Dee and Pan-Dah, to the U.S. in recognition of its wartime aid (See Appendix B). As part of a call for more aid, this gift initiated the use of pandas in public diplomacy. As a barely industrialized China was left alone weak and helpless in the midst of a full-fledged Japanese invasion, Soong hopes to gain support and sympathy from the West by presenting China as a harmless victim of Fascist Japan. Having received a Western education at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, Soong considered pandas a suitable representation of China's image in the West: large in size yet unaggressive in nature. Despite Soong's efforts to gain sympathy, China did not gain much support from the West in its war with Japan. The first attempts at panda diplomacy failed to influence the West's pragmatic diplomatic decisions. Following the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, the Communists found themselves in a similar situation as Nationalist China: isolated from allies and surrounded by hostile nations under the influence of the West. Therefore, they consolidated and enhanced diplomatic practice with pandas to reinforce China's harmless, panda-like nature.

When the World Wildlife Foundation made pandas its logo in 1962, China decided to use the positive image of pandas and named it its national animal, even though the animal had no Chinese cultural legacy. Cambridge Professor, sinologist Roel Sterckx explains that traditional Chinese culture "integrated the animal world into a social model in which the animal's natural behavior was classified within the province of human office." Through centuries of imperial history, Chinese culture always valued animals that evoked power, dignity, and nobility. By traditional standards, pandas, adorable but meek, could never pass as a representation of China.

China made pandas its national animal not because it was well-perceived domestically but because of the nation's diplomatic strategy to please foreign powers. From the era of the Republic to the early Communist era, China found itself overshadowed by Great powers. The Western civilization, led by the United States, standardised general cultural values across the world. Despite its attempts to reject liberal Western culture through Communistic ideologies, China, like many other nations in the twentieth century, fell under the influence of cultural colonialism. Similarly, South Africa's national animal, the springbok, was selected by British colonizers in the twentieth century and remained as a reminiscent symbol of white exclusivity in South Africa. Through globalization, the Western civilization gained the rights to interpret other nation's domestic cultures and make its interpretations more authoritative than the originals. Under such a repressive circumstance, Western powers effectively had more say in defining the Chinese identity than China itself.

Panda Diplomacy Under Generations of Chinese Leadership

Although panda diplomacy originated in China's need to adapt to foreign preferences, as China's status rose, generations of Chinese leadership modified panda diplomacy to reflect

China's transforming international status in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. As China's economic prowess grew, its coercive use of pandas in foreign diplomacy gradually deviated from panda diplomacy's original purpose to establish peaceful relationships from a position of inferiority.

From 1957 to 1959, the Communist Party of China gifted its first pair of pandas, Ping Ping and An An, to its closest ally, the Soviet Union, shortly after the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. These years witnessed the peak in Sino-Soviet trade, which accounted for half of China's total trade. More important than trades were the Soviet advisors and technicians who helped China improve various industries—from nuclear science to telecommunications and metallurgy—which comprehensively supplied China with the basics of industrialization. The unequal status between the two nations guided the principles of China's panda diplomacy. China sent two of its three female pandas to the Soviet Union, knowing that pandas could not survive outside their natural habitats. To China, the fate of pandas was trivial compared to corporeal deals with the Soviets. Similarly, the pandas also weren't factored into consideration during the Sino-Soviet Split that happened a decade later.

Toward the end of Mao Zedong's far-left regime, China adopted a pro-Western approach, initiating a new stage of panda diplomacy symbolized by the induction of the Chinese mainland (PRC) to replace Taiwan (ROC) in the UN and Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972. This stage continued into the era of Deng Xiaoping, who steered China away from Maoism toward practical economics. Born in Sichuan, Deng's guiding political philosophy was to "Hide your strength, bide your time." His application of panda diplomacy emphasized the harmless nature of pandas. A total of sixteen pandas were gifted in pairs to the US, France, Japan, Great Britain, and others (See Appendix C). While Communist China harbored its own ambitions to build up

domestic strength and expand foreign interest, compared to the Great powers, it was economically dwarfed and technologically outdated. It, therefore, used the image of pandas to conceal its ambition and maintain its relationships. Through gifting pandas to nations in the West, China hopes to propagate its harmless intents. 36

In 1982, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) called on China to stop freely gifting out pandas, as it harmed preservation efforts. So China stopped gifting pandas and began loaning them. Jamil Anderlini defines the period of panda loans as a "purely commercial era of panda diplomacy," complete with "highly lucrative short-term loans. However, it is unlikely that China loaned pandas for monetary profit. As each panda was loaned for one million dollars per year, the loans yielded less than a hundred million dollars, insignificant compared to China's \$115 billion foreign trade value in 1990 alone. In truth, China's switch to "panda commercialization" gestured its will to liberalize its economy into a free market. The transition of pandas from gifts to loans also signified that China, with a higher national status, claimed ownership of pandas outside its national boundaries. Though the pandas themselves never had direct, concrete bargaining power, they formally became a political representation of China on foreign soil.

Under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, China stopped its commercial panda loaning to other countries in 1994. A new regulation from CITES declared that panda loans could only be "authorized if both China and the donor country are satisfied that the transaction will generate positive conservation benefits to the species." In response, China clarified that all its panda loans would be for scientific research purposes only. In practice, the regulation allowed China to selectively offer panda loans to trade partners and friendly countries.

China's decision to fully politicize panda diplomacy happened as Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012. As China's economy was second in the world, Xi's panda diplomacy became aggressive. As No longer hesitant about the politicization of pandas, panda diplomacy became a versatile tool in Xi's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks economic and political influence through global construction projects and trade deals. As preservation technologies improved, China generously loaned pandas to over twenty countries around the world. Some of these countries, including the US, were China's major trading partners. Others including ASEAN and Southern Europe were given pandas to celebrate their participation in China's BRI program. These nations admitted the existence of pandas as mute Chinese ambassadors as they establish lucrative relationships with China (See Appendix D).

Through pandas, China flexed its influence in the international community. Men Tibet's Dalai Lama visited Austria in 2013, China threatened to recall pandas from the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. Worried less about their removal but more about China's attitude, Austria was forced to restate its commitment to the One-China Policy, further affirming the coercive nature of panda diplomacy under Xi's prospects. In 2019, China recalled two pandas from the San Diego Zoo amid its trade war with the US, as Dr. Donald Lindburg from the zoo exclaimed that "an era, more or less, ended." This incident revealed that panda diplomacy, in the hands of a stronger and more aggressive China, was applied to weaker and stronger powers to be interpreted as threats or protests. Seemingly unaggressive and uninvolved in international affairs for decades, China under Xi began to show its fangs.

Re-defining the Role of Pandas in Chinese Culture

After diplomatic considerations, Chinese leaders became aware of the need to justify panda diplomacy to its new generation of well-educated citizens. ⁵⁷ In response to concerns about the panda's cultural origin, theses began to circulate on the Chinese internet that pandas were always an integral Chinese cultural symbol. ⁵⁸ Official websites of Chinese museums ⁵⁹ and even the Chinese Academy of Sciences claim that pandas could be identified in ancient Chinese literature. ⁶⁰ Drawing "evidence" from *Shi Ji* (Historical Records) ⁶¹ and even mythical tales like the *Shan Hai Jing* (Classic of Mountains and Seas), ⁶² pandas were attributed to many ancient names, including Pixius and Mos.

In truth, statues of Pixius show no resemblances to pandas but appear rather canine. The Mos, with their distinctive nasal structures, referred to tapirs, not pandas (See Appendix E). As early as 2008, Qian Sun from the Sichuan Normal University published two articles on Acta Zootaxonomica Sinica (Zoological Society of China) and China Nature, refuting misinformation on pandas in ancient Chinese literature. In his research, Sun concludes that independent Chinese sources and government websites tend to misconstrue ancient mythical creatures and relate them to pandas. Professor Donald Harper of Chinese Studies at the University of Chicago affirms the invalidity of linking early myths to pandas, as there was simply not enough evidence to suggest a credible link between pandas and ancient Chinese recordings of some mythical beasts.

A popular myth in China also claimed that seventh-century Chinese empress Wu Zetian offered pandas to Japan as diplomatic gifts. According to Sun's other report, in Japan's *Nihon Shoki* (The Chronicles of Japan) which popular sources quoted, the "gifts" were merely bear skins that probably didn't come from pandas. Pandas were rarely known to the ancient Chinese,

nor were they considered noble or representative of Chinese values. These fabricated histories were meant to validate the PRC's use of pandas in modern diplomacy with a false legacy. ⁶⁹

Under the encouragement of the Chinese Communist Party, writers fabricated or exaggerated the panda's role in ancient Chinese history. ⁷⁰ This is an example of the political use of historical revisionism to suit propaganda and public diplomacy.

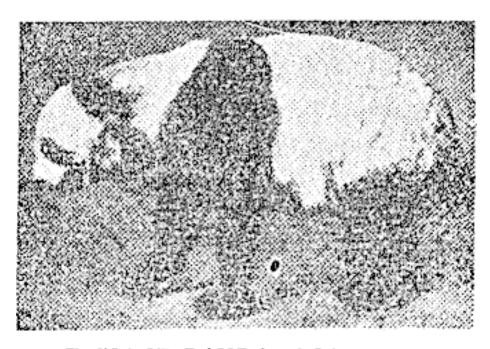
Some Western sources imported misinformation from the Chinese internet and considered pandas a legacy of ancient China. An article from the *Financial Times* claims that panda diplomacy originated in ancient China. Because it's difficult to check the quality of sources in a foreign language, even academic writers such as Linda Zhang from the American Enterprise Institute repeated the debunked Wu Zetian myth in her paper.

Aside from rewriting history, China also re-modeled values associated with pandas. In earlier Chinese newspapers, ⁷⁴ pandas were defined as vegetarians and wholly incapable of causing harm—an image that China hoped could conceal its ambitions. ⁷⁵ In recent years on the Chinese internet, however, pandas have increasingly been associated with omnivores— plant-loving, but meat-eating. ⁷⁶ Compare that to the surging rhetoric in Chinese state media CGTN, which declared "We seek peace, but we are not afraid of war." China under Xi had a deliberate objective in mind to redefine panda's cultural images to justify its aggressive diplomacies.

Conclusion

Professor Sterckx concludes in his research concerning Chinese animal symbolism, "animal species and animal behaviors provided the thesaurus of images and analogies used to evoke a sphere or emotion, impart an impression of the natural world, or get a moral message across." Panda's behavioral patterns are intrinsically neutral; China endorsed pandas to

propagate its values. The origin of panda diplomacy and pandas in Chinese culture was a humiliating compromise to cultural colonialism concealed with a fabricated narrative. At some point, a fabricated ancient Chinese culture integrated into modern Chinese culture. Panda diplomacy and the values of pandas revised, regurgitated, and reinforced Chinese culture in the twenty-first century.



THE GIANT PANDA of Western China, rarest of all animals.

Possibly the earliest Panda sensation at the Chicago Zoological Park in suburban Chicago, 1930.

Pandas were valued preciously and considered the rarest of all animals.

"The Giant Panda of Western China, Rarest of All Animals." *Manawatu Times*, June 9, 1930., page 5

Missions Magazine - - - - March, 1942

THE PANDA COMES TO AMERICA - - - by David C. Graham

Note: In January the Bronx Park Zoo in New York City received two giant Chinese pandas as the gift from Madame Chiang Kai-shek to the American people. How the pandas were procured in the wild mountain region of West China is described in this article. - Ed.

Missionaries are sometimes called upon to perform unusual tasks which they never dreamed would come within the range of missionary service when the foreign board sent them out to their field.

When the Chinese Government decided to secure a live pands for Madame Chiang Kai-Shek to give to the American people in appreciation of their contribution for relief in China, I was asked to do what I could to secure the pands. I replied that for several years there had been a strict prohibition in West China against killing or capturing white pands. Moreover, that the early fall is not a good time for capturing pands or any other animals, because the leaves are still on the trees and underbrush, so that animals can hide easily when only a short distance away. Furthermore hunters are all farmers and during the early fall they are too busy harvesting their crops. After the leaves have fallen and the snow has come farther down the mountain sides, the remimals can easily be tracked in the snow. At that season men have leisure to hunt and gladly do so to supplement the family income. However, I was told that the matter was urgent and that the Government wished to deliver the white pands to the American people as early as possible.

This document by David G. Graham records an American missionary's personal experience hunting down pandas in Sichuan with local hunters, who turned out to be no more familiar with pandas than Graham.

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Appendix C

Periods	Loan Date	Loaner	Loanee	Panda Name	Panda Gender	Exchange/ purpose	Deaths
Pre- Diplomacy	x/x/1869	x	Jean Pierre Armand David(FR)	A dead specimen		Purchased	х
	1935-1936	x	Ruth Harkness (US)	Sulin	Male	Purchased and smuggled	x
	12/x/1935	x	France	Tang, Song, Ming	Male, and Female	Purchased	x/x/1944
Republic Period	11/9/1941	ROC	US	Pan-Dah	Male	To thank American	10/31/1951
Period	11/9/1941	ROC	US	Pan-Dee	Female	assistance with Chinese refugees	10/4/1945
	5/x/1946	ROC	UK	Lian He (United)	Female	One position for Chinese exchange student	х
	1936- 1946	ROC	Various Countries	16+ pandas and 70+specimens		Purchased	x
Era of Mao	x/x/1957	PRC	USSR	Ping Ping	Male	Sino-Soviet Relationship strengthens	х
	x/x/1958	PRC	Austrian Private Business→ UK	Ji Ji	Female	3 giraffes, 2 rhinos, and some hippos and zebras	7/22/1972
	x/x/1959	PRC	USSR	An An	Male	Spouse of Ping Ping	x
	x/x/xxxx	PRC	DPRK	Yi Hao (One)	x	All given between 1965-1980. The	х
	x/x/xxxx	PRC	DPRK	Er Hao (Two)	x	sino-NK relationship strengthens	х
	x/x/xxxx	PRC	DPRK	Ling Ling	x	strengthens	x
	x/x/xxxx	PRC	DPRK	San Xing	x		x
	x/x/xxxx	PRC	DPRK	Dan Dan	x		x
Nixon visits	4/x/1972	PRC	US	Ling Ling	Female	2 Musk Oxes 2 Musk Oxes	х
China	4/x/1972	PRC	US	Xing Xing	Male	2 Made Ones	x
	10/x/1972	PRC	JP	Lan Lan	Female	2 mainland	9/4/1979
	10/x/1972	PRC	JP	Kang Kang	Male	setows	6/30/1980
	12/X/1973	PRC	FR	Yan Yan	Male	x	1/20/2000
	12/X/1973	PRC	FR.	LiLi	Male	x	4/20/1974
	4/x/1974	PRC	UK	Jia Jia	Male	2 white rhinos	x
	4/x/1974	PRC	UK	Jing Jing	Female		x
	9/x/1975	PRC	MX	Ying Ying	Female	Tapirs and sea	х
	9/x/1975	PRC	MX	Bei Bei	Male	Tapirs and sea cows	х
Deng	9/x/1978	PRC	ES	Shao Shao	Female	2 gorillas	х
Xiaoping became the Head of State	9/x/1978	PRC	ES	Qiang Qiang	Male		х
	2/6/1980	PRC	JP	Huan Huan	Female	x	9/21/1997
	11/5/1980	PRC	West GR	Tian Tian	Female	x	x/x/1984
	11/5/1980	PRC	West GR	Bao Bao	Male	x	8/22/2012
	x/x/1982	PRC	JP	Fei Fei	Male	x	12/14/1994

Records of Republic of China's and People's Republic of China's panda loans and gifts to foreign countries from 1869 to 1982

"Panda Diplomacy Records: 1941-1982." Baidu, 2013. https://baike.baidu.com/.

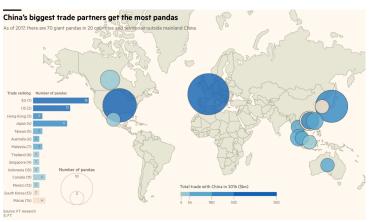


Table 1. China free-trade agreements (FTAs) and panda status

Agreement	Year came into effect	Panda gift loan	Year FTA agreed	Status
ASEAN-China Free-Trade Area	January 1, 2010	Thailand	2009	Extended 2010
(ACFTA)		Singapore		Arrived 2012
		Hong-Kong		Already in place
		Malaysia		Expected 2014
China-New Zealand	January 1, 2009		2008	Pandas not yet arrived
China-Singapore	January 1, 2009*		2008	Arrived November 2012
China-Macao	October 1, 2009		2009	Arrived December 2010. ASEAN,
				Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Table 2. China's trading partners and panda status

Position	Trading partner	Date latest panda arrived		
1	United States	Two extended, two cubs repatriated 2010		
2	Japan	2011		
3	Hong Kong	2007		
4	South Korea	Sent 1995-1999		
5	Taiwan	2008 (after the earthquake		
6	Germany	Sent 1995, died 2007		
7	Australia	2009		
8	Malaysia	Expected 2014		
9	Singapore	2012		
10	India	NA		
13	United Kingdom	2012		
15	Thailand	Extended 2010		
No data	Canada	2012		
	France	2012		

Source: Wikipedia (2013).

The map and the tables show a strong positive correlation between China's trade relationships with a country and the number of pandas loaned to that country.

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Appendix E



Pixiu statue

Malaysian Tapir

A statue of Pixius and a Malaysian Tapir (Mo in classical Chinese), which many Chinese sources attribute as the ancient names of pandas, show little to no resemblance to a giant panda.

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