

Popular giant pandas gently build trust across the world

International research, cooperation helping beloved bears thrive. Zhao Jia reports

During a visit to Adelaide Zoo on his recent official visit to Australia, Premier Li Qiang announced that China would loan a new pair of giant pandas to the country to continue cooperative research on conservation of the globally loved animal.

Adelaide Zoo has been home to giant pandas Wang Wang and Fu Ni since 2009, when they were relocated to South Australia from Wolong National Nature Reserve in Southwest China's Sichuan province.

The bears were loaned for a period of 10 years and the arrangement was extended by five years in 2019. The extension of the loan is due to expire at the end of this year.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said the new pandas would remain the star attraction of the zoo, the only one in the Southern Hemisphere that has giant pandas.

Since 1949, China has sent pandas to foreign zoos to act as goodwill ambassadors. For the recipients, the move is widely considered a gesture of friendship, trust and respect.

In the 1980s, China stopped sending pandas abroad as gifts due to their dwindling numbers. The endangered animals could only be loaned, often in pairs for 10-year periods, for breeding and biological research cooperation with foreign countries. All cubs born abroad belong to China.

In October 2022, Qatar became the first country in the Middle East to receive Chinese giant pandas when a pair arrived in the capital Doha to mark the hosting of the FIFA World Cup. Female Si Hai and male Jing Jing are due to stay in Qatar for 15 years under a giant panda conservation and research cooperation project.

The Qatari government has built a hall for the giant pandas so that they can enjoy air conditioning and sleep in separate quarters. Facilities for medical treatment, food preparation, bamboo preservation and safety monitoring are also in place.

Caretakers look after the pandas around the clock and communicate with them in Mandarin and English. Staff members are also learning the Sichuan dialect to make the pandas "feel at home".

While keeping pandas can be costly for zoos, they are seen as drawcards for visitors and help generate income.

Also, China has strict standards when it comes to selecting foreign zoos for giant panda cooperation projects.

Si Ping, deputy secretary-general



Giant panda Fu Bao, who was born at the Everland Park in 2020 and returned to China in April, met the public for the first time in the Wolong Shenshuping Base of the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda in Sichuan province on June 12. LI CHUANYOU / FOR CHINA DAILY



Athletes participating in the Chengdu FISU World University Games take photos of pandas at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding in Sichuan province in July last year. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

of the China Wildlife Conservation Association, said potential partners must have a good reputation and a strong desire for collaboration.

They should have complete facilities, sufficient food sources, a professional feeding and management team, a high-level scientific research team, and the capability for sustainable development, she said.

Only institutions that meet these requirements can be considered for potential cooperation partners, she added.

More than 10 giant pandas, including Fu Bao, were due to return to China this year, according

to the China Wildlife Conservation Association.

Fu Bao was born at the Everland Park in the Republic of Korea in July 2020 to two giant pandas moved to the country in 2016. The panda returned to Chengdu, Sichuan province, on April 3.

Fu Bao's videos enjoyed massive popularity on Everland Park's YouTube channel, attracting around 500 million views. Everland said about 5.5 million people had visited the park just to see Fu Bao.

China has launched a multimedia platform, iPanda, which highlights the breeding and conservation

projects of giant pandas and other rare wildlife species.

Panda lovers around the world are able to watch live panda broadcasts on the YouTube channels of the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda and the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding.

A flagship species of wildlife conservation, the giant panda has played an important role in advancing protection of biodiversity.

As the rarest member of the bear family and one of the world's most vulnerable animals, the giant panda has long drawn global attention to at-risk and endangered species.

Since its founding in 1961, the World Wide Fund for Nature has used the giant panda on its logo, with the iconic image serving as a rallying symbol for the global conservation movement. In 2021, China officially designated its first group of national parks, including the Giant Panda National Park with a total area covering more than 22,000 square kilometers.

The move marks an important step forward in China's efforts to promote ecological protection and facilitate harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

According to the National Forestry and Grassland Administration, China is carrying out panda conservation

research with 18 overseas institutions from 17 countries, and there are over 50 giant pandas living abroad.

Both Chinese and foreign parties have jointly tackled a series of technical challenges in the areas of giant panda conservation, breeding, disease prevention and control, and reintroduction to the wild, significantly enhancing the scientific research of giant panda conservation.

Phil Ainsley, the director of Adelaide Zoo, shared his excitement about the two new pandas coming to his zoo in a video interview with reporters, saying the move allows him and his colleagues to continue to conserve and learn about the "amazing species".

"The conservation message is really important," he said, adding collaborative programs between the two countries not only help the giant panda, but also other species that will benefit from the restoration and protection of environments.

In 2021, China announced pandas had been downgraded from endangered to vulnerable, saying the classification upgrade reflected the animals' improved living conditions and the country's efforts to integrate their habitats.

Thanks to the ongoing giant panda conservation efforts, the number of wild pandas in China has grown to nearly 1,900.

AI used to help preserve ancient wooden pagoda

By LUO WANGSHU and ZHU XINGXIN

Artificial intelligence is being used to safeguard the country's oldest and tallest wooden pagoda in North China's Shanxi province that has withstood natural disasters and human calamities for 968 years.

The technology is being used to enhance the understanding of the 67-meter-tall Sakyamuni Pagoda, visualize its states over time and prepare for restoration work.

AI is not only being used to aid in preserving the pagoda in Yingxian county's Fogong Temple, but also to enhance the visitor experience by revealing its significant architectural, historical and religious value.

Built in 1056 during the Liao Dynasty (916-1125), the pagoda, made entirely out of wood without the use of nails, has weathered earthquakes, wars and other challenges. Its intricate structure features innumerable mortises and tenons.

As tall as a 20-story building, and with a base diameter of about 30 meters, the pagoda is a remarkable architectural feat.

For its protection, visitors can only enter the first floor and are prohibited from climbing to higher levels. AI technology, however, will allow them to experience the whole pagoda through 3D animation.

When renowned architect Liang Sicheng visited the pagoda for the first time in 1933, he was impressed by the pagoda's intricate structure and ingenious design. He meticulously measured, surveyed and recorded the building, introducing its treasured relics to China and the world.

In Yingxian, the Sakyamuni Pagoda, also known as the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, has been the most prominent landmark for generations, but over the years the pagoda has developed a slight lean.

Zhao Yushan, a 63-year-old carpenter in Yingxian, was so taken aback when he first saw the tower as a teenager that he has since dedicated most of his life to replicating it. He has made numerous scale versions of the pagoda using only the traditional methods of construction, and is currently working on an 8-meter-tall replica.

The pagoda is an octagonal structure comprising nine stories,

with five visible from the outside and four concealed within. The Buddhist statues on each story and the paintings adorning the inner walls of the first floor are all creations from the Liao Dynasty.

"We local people believe the pagoda was built by Lu Ban (China's legendary master carpenter of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). The work is beyond manpower," said a Yingxian resident surnamed Li.

He said that as the pagoda's lean has increased over the past few years, the need for restoration has become more urgent.

In April, a virtual reality program that replicates the pagoda was released by Chinese technology company Lenovo Group and Tsinghua University's School of Architecture.

Wearing VR glasses, visitors can experience what it would be like to climb the pagoda and explore its interior.

The program has been donated to the county government to become a part of its digital museum.

In February last year, the school began conducting modeling work on the wooden structure inside



The Sakyamuni Pagoda of the Fogong Temple in Yingxian county, Shanxi province. ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

the pagoda, creating a database of parameters through structural research.

Meanwhile, Lenovo Group is utilizing its AI-generated spatial computing technology, which combines AI, neural radiance fields technology and extended reality technology to construct a digital "twin" of the pagoda.

Besides benefiting tourists, the technologies provide strong technical support for re-creating the complete

structure and details of the pagoda.

Mao Shijie, vice-president of Lenovo Group and head of Lenovo Research Shanghai, said the project has utilized cutting-edge AIGC technology, enabling the swift digital reconstruction of the pagoda within 10 hours.

By combining AI algorithms with data collected from drones and radar cameras, the project aims to re-create the pagoda's intricate details accurately, he said.

Trendy travel bug bites young Chinese tourists

By ZHU WENQIAN

Young Chinese tourists are adopting trendy travel options for visits abroad this summer, including watching pop concerts, participating in music festivals and visiting landmark attractions nearby.

Several Chinese students who completed the National College Entrance Examination in June plan to travel abroad with friends this summer to watch concerts and take tours of surrounding attractions.

Tourism companies have launched targeted products to satisfy this growing demand.

Trip.com Group, China's largest online travel agency, recently collaborated with Republic of Korea television station SBS for the first time to launch travel packages that combine the admission tickets of concerts and scenic spots, as well as hotels.

Besides offering an official channel for ticket purchases, the packages also provide options for travelers to take cars to and from concert venues. These were sold out overnight immediately after the first group of products was launched in June.

The main consumer groups who bought the packages were born in the 1990s or after 2000, which together accounted for 77 percent of the total, and they are mainly from Shanghai, Beijing, as well as Guangdong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Sichuan and Fujian provinces.

On social media platforms in China, there have been a large number of posts about the experiences of booking concert tours overseas. Several have inquired online about the official ticket purchasing options for concerts, while others have sought out people who can join them in watching these overseas shows.

Most official websites in the Republic of Korea don't provide Chinese language versions, so it has been difficult for Chinese fans to buy tickets with a good view of the show.

Previously, Trip.com had achieved positive results in distributing overseas performance tickets as an agent. Popular Republic of Korea singer IU held a concert in Hong Kong in May, and all the available concert tickets on Trip.com were sold out within 30 seconds of launch.

Besides, booking volumes for travel products to Hong Kong surged sixfold after the availability of the concert tickets, indicating the strong driving force of concerts on the local tourism market, Trip.com said.

Summer is the peak travel season for Chinese consumers. So far, the booking volumes for outbound tourism products have surged 150 percent over last summer, according to Qunar, a Beijing-based online travel agency.

Some countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, which have issued visa-free entry policies to Chinese travelers, are expected to see the popularity of their tourism markets exceed levels recorded in the pre-pandemic period of 2019, according to Qunar.

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