

Allure of the furry envoys

Since 1972, giant pandas have won hearts as enduring symbols of the China-US relationship

By XINHUA

In April, 19-month-old giant panda cub Bei Bei climbed a tree at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington DC, the United States, drawing laughter from the adoring crowds.

Stephanie Smith, overjoyed by Bei Bei's every move at the zoo's giant panda house, said: "I started coming here way back in the 1970s when China gifted two (giant) pandas to Washington."

Smith is one of the 2 million panda fans coming to Washington to see the giant pandas every year.

"They are just part of Washington like our first family," she said. "They are such peaceful, wise creatures."

In 1972, giant pandas Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing arrived in Washington to a welcome party of around 8,000 Americans in the rain. The pandas were presented by the Chinese government to the US as a gift to commemorate the groundbreaking handshakes between both countries' leaders that year.

It marked the first time that the Chinese government gifted giant pandas to a Western country.

The New York Times reported the story on its front page, saying that "zoo directors are bringing every kind of pressure to get one of the furry clowns with the black-patched white bodies and the black-ringed eyes".

Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing attracted more than 20,000 people on their first day on view at the National Zoo. And during their first month there, visitor numbers reached around 110,000, arousing not only "pandamania" across the country, but also a keen interest in China among the American people.

The US marked 1972 as "the year of the panda" with "panda diplomacy" bringing people from both sides of the Pacific Ocean closer together. More than four decades later, giant pandas have remained a symbol of friendship between the two countries.

On March 24 this year, US-born giant panda Bao Bao made her first public appearance in Chengdu, capital of Southwest China's Sichuan province, following her move there from the National Zoo in Washington.

David H Rank, US charge d'affaires, said that after watching the 3-year-old female settling into her new home, he thought the day meant much to the cooperation between the US and China. He also praised the efforts between the two countries on scientific research and the protection of endangered wildlife.

Bao Bao was accompanied by her



GIANT PANDAS are some of the world's most vulnerable and rare creatures. The US has the most giant pandas outside China. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

American keeper Marty Dearie and veterinarian Katharine Hope during the 16-hour trip to Chengdu. She was greeted by Chinese experts on arrival on Feb 22.

"Upon arrival at the Dujiangyan panda base, Bao Bao walked into her new enclosure within one minute when her new keeper opened her travel crate door. She immediately started exploring and was very relaxed," Dearie wrote on the website of the US National Zoo.

"Hopefully, in a few years our colleagues in China will share happy news with us that Bao Bao has become a mom," he said.

Bao Bao — meaning precious or treasure in Chinese — was the first female panda born at the US National Zoo, and has won the hearts of the American people since her birth in 2013. Her parents Mei Xiang and Tian Tian moved to the American zoo in 2000 under an agreement between China and the US.

From 1984, China stopped giving giant pandas as gifts to other nations and began to offer them only on a 10-year-loan basis. According to the agreement, panda cubs born in the US to parents on loan from China must be returned to China before they are 4 years old.

Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the US, wrote in *The Washington Post* in 2013: "Because it's very difficult for giant pandas to breed naturally, Chinese and Americans have been working on breeding them through artificial insemination."

The US State Department also called giant pandas "a tangible and fluffy manifestation of cooperation between the United States and China."

Bao Bao serves as the latest example of giant pandas being envoys of the China-US friendship.

"You will be forever with me, Princess Pinky. I am so sad," said Dawn LaValley, a fan calling herself Bao

Bao's auntie. "I feel so connected with you that I have a tattoo on my left arm of you," she said.

The Chinese embassy in Washington recently received a letter and two drawings from the Foltz family, saying that they wrote "in great appreciation" for China sharing the giant panda with the American people.

Giant pandas are some of the world's most vulnerable and rare creatures, with a known population of only 1,600, mostly in China. The US has the most giant pandas outside China, with 12 living in zoos in Washington, Atlanta, San Diego and Memphis.