

Japan bids teary farewell to pandas sent to reserve in China

February 21 2023, by Mari Yamaguchi



Ouhin and Touhin, giant panda twins, eat bamboo sticks at the Adventure World in Shirahama, western Japan, on March 24, 2017. Japanese panda fans on Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023, bid teary farewells to their idols Xiang Xiang, “super papa” Eimei and his twin daughters, Ouhin and Touhin, ahead of their departure to China, where they will live in a protected facility in Sichuan province. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

Japanese panda fans bid teary farewells to their idols Xiang Xiang, "super papa" Eimei and his twin daughters who were sent to China on Tuesday to swap their home at the zoo for a protected facility in Sichuan province.

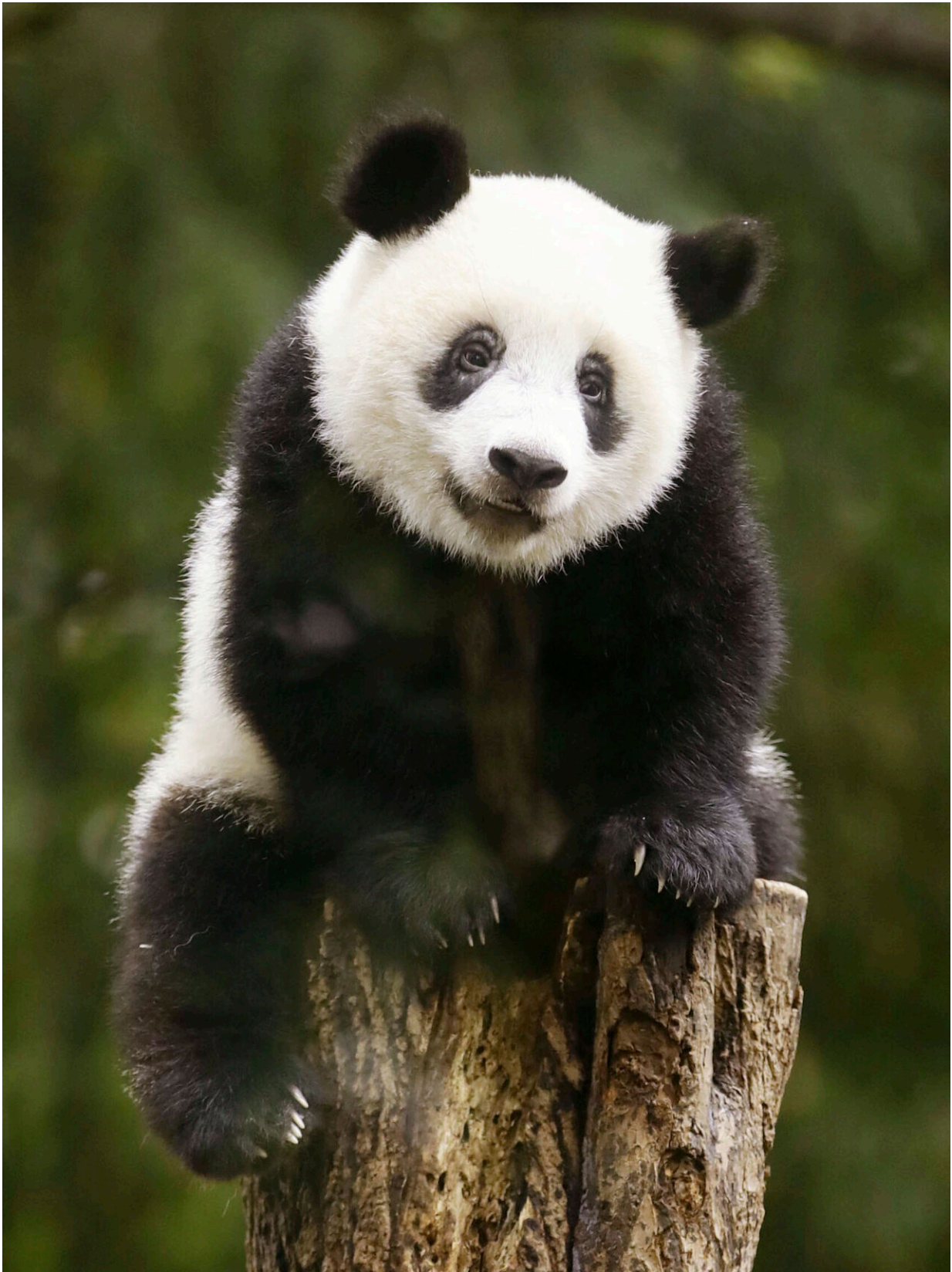
Hundreds of people who waited outside Tokyo's Ueno Zoo took photos, wiped tears with handkerchiefs and waved at a white truck carrying Xiang Xiang as it slowly drove past them on its way to the airport. Others trooped to Narita International Airport to wave their last goodbyes as a plane carrying Xiang Xiang took off.

The last public viewing of Xiang Xiang on Sunday was limited to 2,600 lucky ones who won their tickets in an extremely competitive lottery of more than half a million applicants.

Xiang Xiang was escorted by two zoo staff on the flight to Chengdu. She was in [good health](#) and relaxed during her departure proceedings at the airport, where she ate her favorite snacks of bamboo shoots and apples, the Ueno Zoo tweeted.

Ueno Zoo Director Yutaka Fukuda said he will miss her as he had seen her grow since her birth in 2017. "I want to thank her for making so many people happy," he said. "I hope she will contribute to panda conservation research after safely completing her journey."

Xiang Xiang, the first naturally conceived panda at the zoo, was originally set to be returned to China in December 2020, but her trip was delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic.



Xiang Xiang, a giant panda, is seen during her one-year-old birthday celebrations at the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo in June 2018. Japanese panda fans on Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023, bid teary farewells to their idols Xiang Xiang, “super papa” Eimei and his twin daughters, Ouhin and Touhin, ahead of their departure to China, where they will live in a protected facility in Sichuan province. Credit: Hiroki Yamauchi/Kyodo News via AP

China sends pandas abroad as a sign of goodwill but maintains ownership over the animals and any cubs they produce. The animals are native to southwestern China and are an unofficial national mascot.

At the Adventure World, another zoo in a central Japanese coastal town of Shirahama, three other pandas appeared before the public for the last time on Tuesday, one day before they head back to China. They are elderly male Eimei, who was sent from China in 1994 and has since fathered 16 cubs, earning him the nickname "super papa," as well as two of his Japanese-born daughters Ouhin and Touhin.

The reproductive-age twin sisters will move to Sichuan to find suitable partners. They did not show interest in males at the Japanese zoo. Four other female pandas will stay behind, and the park is seeking a male panda for them to be sent from China.



Ouhin, one of the giant panda twins at the Adventure World in Shirahama, western Japan, looks at ice blocks given to her on her eighth birthday on Dec. 2, 2022. Japanese panda fans on Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023, bid teary farewells to their idols Xiang Xiang, “super papa” Eimei and his twin daughters, Ouhin and Touhin, ahead of their departure to China, where they will live in a protected facility in Sichuan province. Credit: Kyodo News via AP



Eimei, who was sent from China in 1994 and has since fathered 16 cubs, bites a bamboo stick at the Adventure World in Shirahama, western Japan, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. Japanese panda fans on Tuesday bid teary farewells to their idols Xiang Xiang, “super papa” Eimei and his twin daughters, Ouhin and Touhin, ahead of their departure to China, where they will live in a protected facility in Sichuan province. Credit: Yosuke Mizuno/Kyodo News via AP



Touhin, a giant panda, chews bamboo at the Adventure World in Shirahama, Wakayama Prefecture, western Japan, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. Japanese panda fans on Tuesday bid teary farewells to their idols Xiang Xiang, “super papa” Eimei and his twin daughters, Ouhin and Touhin, ahead of their departure to China, where they will live in a protected facility in Sichuan province. Credit: Yosuke Mizuno/Kyodo News via AP

Visitors signed messages for their favorite pandas. "Thank you Eimei, stay health and live long!" one of them said. Local media carried their profiles and history along with their cuddly photos of them growing up.

Despite strained political ties between Japan and China, pandas have connected people in both countries and contributed to the friendship, Japanese fans say. The Chinese Embassy called them "the cutest

messengers of friendship" who have bonded people's hearts in both countries, and said it hopes that Japanese will continue to follow their progress after their return to China.

Pandas, which reproduce rarely in the wild and rely on a diet of bamboo, remain among the world's most threatened species. An estimated 1,800 pandas live in the wild, while another 500 are in zoos or reserves, mostly in Sichuan.

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