

Japanese bid farewell to beloved panda returning to China

February 20 2023, by Mari Yamaguchi



Visitors hold up smartphone to film Giant panda Xiang Xiang seen at a cage during her last viewing day at Ueno Zoo, before she returns to China for good, Sunday, Feb. 19, 2023 in Tokyo, Japan. Xiang Xiang, who was born six years ago, is the first giant panda to be born and raised naturally at the zoo and is being sent back to China for breeding purposes. Credit: Masanori Takei/Kyodo News via AP

Thousands of Japanese fans, some wiping away tears, bid farewell to a beloved Japanese-born giant panda that made her final public appearance Sunday before flying to her home country, China.

The panda fans gathered at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo for one last look at Xiang Xiang, the park's idol since her birth in June 2017.

Sunday's viewing was limited to 2,600 lucky ones who won their tickets in an extremely competitive lottery. But many others who didn't win came anyway to say their goodbyes from outside of the panda house.

"Xiang Xiang is not only cute but charming and funny. She's so attractive that if you see her once, you want to see her more. I don't think there is any panda like her in the universe," said a visitor who only gave her first name, Yukie. "I've made friends here by sharing it, and that is also her attraction."

Though she was born and grew up at the Tokyo zoo, Xiang Xiang, whose parents Ri Ri and Shin Shin are on loan from China, must return to that country.

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.

Divided into groups of about 10, the visitors were given only a few minutes to quietly say goodbye to Xiang Xiang as she nonchalantly nibbled on bamboo sticks. Viewers held up their mobile phones and cameras to capture her every move.



Giant panda Xiang Xiang is seen at a cage during her last viewing day at Ueno Zoo, before she returns to China for good, Sunday, Feb. 19, 2023 in Tokyo, Japan. Xiang Xiang, who was born six years ago, is the first giant panda to be born and raised naturally at the zoo and is being sent back to China for breeding purposes. Credit: Masanori Takei/Kyodo News via AP

"I wish Japanese-born pandas could stay in Japan," said Takamichi Masui, an auto parts maker who traveled from Mie, in central Japan. "So many people who came today and fans are sad to see her go. When I saw (Xiang Xiang), I got teary. I wish Xiang Xiang could stay, though I understand it's difficult."

He said he worries if Xiang Xiang can smoothly adapt to her new life in

China.

Natsuki Mizuguchi, a graphic designer, wore a parka, socks and shoes decorated with Xiang Xiang's head photo that she had taken.

Mizuguchi said she first saw Xiang Xiang when she was recovering from [health issues](#) but has since gotten better. "I wanted to express my appreciation to Xiang Xiang," Mizuguchi said. "I'm certain she will be an idol in China too and I hope she serves the friendship between our two countries."



Visitors wait in line in front of Ueno Zoo in Tokyo Sunday, Feb. 19, 2023, the last viewing day for giant panda Xiang Xiang, before she returns to China for good. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

Her friend, Akane Hiramoto, a nurse, said she could not win a slot Sunday and her visit Saturday became her last.

"I would love to go see her in China," Hiramoto said. "I hope Japan and China can deepen friendship through pandas like Xiang Xiang and also environmental issues, for instance."

Despite strained political ties between Japan and China, pandas have connected people in both countries and contributed to the friendship, Japanese fans say.

Xiang Xiang, accompanied by two Ueno Zoo staff, will be flown to China on Tuesday. She'll join other pandas at a facility in Sichuan province, close to the original panda habitat.

"I became emotional when I saw many people shedding tears saying goodbye to her," said Ueno Zoo spokesperson Naoya Ohashi.

But there is one more day before her departure, and, "as zoo keepers, we will fulfill our responsibility and do utmost to safely send her to China," he said.



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"I hope she will get used to a new environment quickly, find a good partner and have children," Ohashi said.

Three other pandas at another park, the Adventure World, in central Japan—elderly male Eimei, sent from China in 1994, and his Japanese-born twin daughters Ouhin and Touhin—will head to China on Wednesday mainly to find suitable partners for the reproductive-age twin pandas. Four female pandas will remain after the handover and the park is seeking a male panda to be sent from 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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