

# California zoo throws a show to welcome back Chinese pandas

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After traveling nearly 7,000 miles (11,000 kilometers) from the mountainous region of Sichuan, the two giant pandas are now the undisputed stars of the San Diego Zoo.

California pulled out all the stops Thursday to welcome the arrival of

two new giant pandas from China, the first to be sent by Beijing to the United States in 21 years.

The young bears were greeted by children in panda hats and dignitaries, as well as a show including traditional Chinese dances.

Yun Chuan and Xin Bao appeared, however, to be little moved by the performances and the symbolism of their arrival, at a time of gradually thawing US-China relations.

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"My children only wanted to see two things in America: orcas and pandas," Guillaume Courcoux, a Swiss tourist whose family was among the spectators Thursday, told AFP. "They were very impressed."

California Governor Gavin Newsom celebrated the "panda mania" and declared August 8 "Panda Day" in the state.

"This is about something much deeper, much richer than just the two beautiful pandas we celebrate," the Democrat said. "It's about celebrating our common humanity. It's about celebrating the things that bind us together."

Until recently, the loan of the two pandas seemed an unlikely dream.



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With fierce trade competition, and disagreements over Taiwan and [human rights](#), tensions between China and the United States have been rising for several years—to the point that Beijing's traditional "panda diplomacy" seemed to have frozen.

In recent years, pandas at zoos in Washington DC, Atlanta and Memphis were all returned to Beijing, after loan agreements were not renewed.

However, at a key summit between US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in November, the latter announced that Beijing would continue the program in the United States.

China's loaning of pandas around the world is both a diplomatic symbol and a way to help the survival of a vulnerable species.

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## **'Our shared future'**

China first offered its pandas to the United States in 1972 under US President Richard Nixon.

Since then, the country has used its loan of the black-and-white bears to send diplomatic messages.

For instance, after President Barack Obama met with the Dalai Lama in 2010, who is seen as a rebel by Beijing, China recalled two of its pandas.

The San Diego Zoo has enjoyed a decades-long partnership with Chinese authorities, having received two pandas in 1996 that gave birth to six cubs in captivity.

All of the pandas were returned to China in 2019, in line with earlier agreements.

The return of the pandas is not only a boon for the zoo, where their presence attracts thousands of visitors a year, but also supports the propagation of the species, which is notoriously difficult in the wild.



The pandas were welcomed with much fanfare, including a traditional Chinese dance.

Zoo officials described four-year-old Yun Chuan as a "mild-mannered, gentle and lovable" male, who was named after his grandmother, Bai Yun, one of the initial two pandas loaned to San Diego.

The other panda, three-year-old female Xin Bao, is a "gentle and witty introvert," zoo officials said. Her name means a "new treasure of prosperity and abundance."

"We hope she will bring you good luck to California, to San Diego," China's ambassador to the United States Xie Feng said.

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