





THE **TAO** OF
CHINA
PANDA

Story & Photographs by Keith Harmon Snow

It was in Wolong that a big panda took a swipe at me... she did not miss. Her razor claws raked down the center of my chest. I am—laughing—alive to tell you about it. Mine was the luck of the dragon. Good fortune, long life.

“The name of this place means ‘hidden dragon,’” Chengdu local Peter Wood told me. “The people here can find their fortune. The place has good *feng shui*.” Peter Wood was my personal escort to Wolong. “Usually the dragon is good. Good energy. Good luck. Health and happiness.”

We are flying over a serpentine road in Sichuan, about 150 kilometers from Chengdu, in a hired car. The mountains are alive. In Chinese geomancy it is said, “When mountains appear as if they are dancing and swirling, dragons—the power of land—are born.”

Wolong is the dragon’s realm. It is also home to giant pandas. The curved roofs of Chinese architecture are built to ward off ghosts and demons—who travel in straight lines—and many dragons inscribe doorways and protrude into space. The roofs of huts puff smoke. Turquoise rivers tumble out of the mountains, slither through gorges, slide over falls, curl around boulders. Cliffs jut through clouds like dragons’ wings. Cable and rope bridges hang over water, swaying underfoot, their walkways of beaten planks curving like long, toothy dragon’s smiles—teeth missing.

The mountains of Wolong are spectacular, ominous, forbidding. I expect them to open and breathe fire. The mists of the vertical peaks drift, take shape, dissolve, dragons coming and going. The dragon landforms of Wolong are its protectors.

“Once long ago, the story is told,” wrote George Schaller, in his book *The Last Panda*, “a dragon flew over these mountains and was so enraptured by their beauty that it decided to rest awhile.” The grandfather of wildlife conservation, George Schaller pioneered panda research and protection at Wolong.

THE GHOSTS OF THE FOREST

Peter Wood checks me into Wolong’s Panda Inn. Across the yard we find Dr. Li Desheng, assistant director of the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda. Dr. Li and Peter Wood converse in Mandarin, then turn to me. “There are many pandas to see here,” says Dr. Li. “It’s not safe to go into the mountains.”

“It’s dangerous,” Peter Wood agrees. Peter is a board member for Pandas International, which supports Wolong. “You should not go far from the road,” he says, as he drives off. Busloads of tourists come and go, but for four days I am alone at the expansive Panda Inn.

The little racoonish Red Panda—the giant panda’s closest relative—can be seen and cuddled at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding in China; (facing page) every park and garden in China, it seems, has a pond where children’s fish-feeding dreams come true.



Crossing the Pitiao River, I ignore the *accessible* pandas at the Giant Panda Garden and climb away from the research station. Trudging upwards I remember a Tao proverb: *A thousand mile journey begins with one step*. I climb through electrified fences and greenery, expecting to see pandas—but black and white is perfect camouflage for beings in bamboo.

“There are 143 wild pandas and more than 400 animal species at Wolong,” Dr. Li tells me later. There are musk deer, serow goats, snow leopards, golden cats, antelope, moon bears, *takin* (kin to the musk ox), flying squirrels, golden monkeys, little red pandas. But I am alone with the silence—the fleeting dragons, and the other ghosts of the forest.

Somewhere here lives *four year-old* Xiang-xiang, first captive-born panda to receive wild life training.

Conifers and evergreens mix with thickets of bamboo—the staple diet of pandas. Mosses hang like dragons’ scales, yellow, green and slippery. A reptilian mist chills my bones. There are paw prints in black mud, clumps of semidigested bamboo and other panda spoor. *All things come from the Tao, and return to the Tao; all life is transformation and change.*

“No pandas adorn ancient scrolls or murals, yet Chinese art swarms with wildlife,” George Schaller wrote. I am reading his book, thawing out, in mountain sunshine. “The turtle represents wisdom, the crane long life, the bat good luck. The tiger is a symbol of belligerence and power, and the deer of riches, but the panda lacks such spiritual resonance; it has no mythic reality, no allegory, in Chinese history. Perhaps it was left out of this pantheon because of its self-effacing habit of hiding in bamboo. It is an animal of illusion, even more than a dragon.”

A hawk flashes out of mist, disappears, hawkishly. Woodpeckers peck wood. It is a day of yin (mountain energy) stillness. The sun melts white into green. Frozen trees thaw. Four Maiden’s Mountain reaches 6,248 meters here, and I guess myself to be at about 1,500 meters. Every now and then some invisible dragon crashes through bamboo. I hike down the mountain after dark.



PANDAS IN MYTH AND IMAGINATION

Out front of the Panda Inn you will find local Yi or Qiang tribeswomen selling handwoven mittens, gloves and yak-wool socks. They peddle roots and cures, scented herbs, rabbit’s feet and leopard’s teeth, reminding me that today, as yesterday, bears’ paws and gallbladders are coveted sinecures of Chinese pharmacopoeia.

The Chinese name for the giant panda is *daxiongmao*. “*Xiong* means ‘bear,’ *mao* means ‘cat,’” says Dr. Li. “Some characteristics of panda are like bear, some like cat.”

Historians have equated the pandas with creatures of early Chinese texts—the *pixiu*, the *mo*, and the *zhouyu*. But the *pixiu* was bear and tiger, and one book showed it to be a malevolent rabbit with leopard spots and fangs. The *mo* ate both copper and iron, resembled a tapir, and was yellow and black. One ancient text shows the *mo* with spotted body, long limbs, wolf’s ears, and elephant’s trunk. In another the *zhouyu*—an otherwise perfect panda—had “a tail longer than its body.”

The big bear cats were once believed to have magical powers that could ward off natural disasters and evil spirits, and sleeping on a panda skin kept away ghosts and foretold the future: a good night brought good fortune. The panda is



a living, breathing symbol of the two great Chinese forces of unity (yin) and separation (yang): black and white, dark and light, sun and moon, summer and winter, life and death.

My search for this animal of illusion began at the Forbidden City, in Beijing, where demons and dragons project from roofs like gargoyles, extrude from pillars, fly across courtyards. There are bonsai gardens with demonic statues, and the imperial accouterments often have wildlife depicted on them. But the black-and-white bear cats are nowhere in the Forbidden City.

You will find them at the Beijing Zoo—a place as yet untouched by the makeover that is sweeping through Beijing for the 2008 Olympics—but the zookeepers have forgotten their feng shui, and the zoo shows it. The officials there assure me that the tigers, panthers, primates, wolves and polar bears will soon begin to share the fortunes of admission. However, seeing the giant pandas for the first time is thought provoking and, for me, the lure of the Chinese bear cat becomes curiouser and curiouser.

RENT-A-PANDA

“The Chengdu Panda Eco-Park is convenient for visiting pandas.” My guardian and deliverer-of-pandas Peter Wood escorts me to the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding in China. Some 30 pandas inhabit the simulated wilderness, the enclosures hidden by trees. “In 2005, only



Playful adult pandas at the Wolong Nature Reserve spend hours and hours chewing bamboo—up to 13 kilos a day. There are three or four types of bamboo, and among the threats to panda survival is the lack of this primary food source, when, periodically, bamboo flowers and dies.

one panda was born here,” says Peter, “but they are trying very hard to make pandas.”

Mid-morning, pandas are napping. Some sleep like caterpillars coiled for winter. Unlike bears, the giant panda does not hibernate. Others chew bamboo: adults daily eat about 15 kilos. Such is the life of the elusive bear cat: chew bamboo, sleep, chew bamboo, mate (rarely), sleep.

The park’s museum of panda history outlines panda genealogy. Dioramas of prehistory show saber-toothed tigers and other preposterous creatures in velvet skins and faded colors. The message seems to be that the pandas are dinosaurs that have survived into the present.

Scientists cannot agree on the origin of the pandas. The giant pandas’ closest relative is the “lesser” or red panda, a toy of proper cuddling proportions. Some say the red panda is a raccoon. And the giant panda is a bear. Others say the giant panda is a raccoon, and the red panda is a miniature bear. So did the giant panda lose its raccoon tail? A panda can be a bear, but can a bear be a panda? *A bird can fly, but a fly can’t bird...*

“The little red panda is related to the giant panda,” Peter Wood explains. These are cute, furry, red and black raccoon bears found across Asian mountains. We find the four-legged fur balls being enticed by sweet apples and children. I have a sudden higher realization: children with live raccoon bears squirming in their laps are perpetually laughing.

Meeting the Pandas

The big bear cats once roamed from Chengdu to Shanghai, Beijing to Vietnam but today they inhabit protected areas only in Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu provinces. There are 35 giant panda reserves in Sichuan.

Chengdu is the best place to kick off a panda excursion: hotels and tour agencies abound with options, but some operators contribute to the endangerment of species. The Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding in China is a perfect day trip.

The Wolong Nature Reserve and Giant Panda Conservation Center are easily accessed from Chengdu. By car it is a three-hour drive. Public buses pass the Wolong Panda Inn daily; Chengdu is a half-day’s journey.

Peter Wood of West China Adventures (.com) also suggests Wanglang Nature Reserve, an isolated wilderness some 450 kilometers from Chengdu. “You can see wild pandas at Wanglang,” he says. “Most people fly in. It’s remote and very beautiful, with valleys of wildflowers. There are Qiang and Tibetan minority people’s villages, yaks grazing in the fields, crystal clear water.”

You can also find China’s giant pandas in zoos in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and at a theme park in Hong Kong. Find information about panda research and conservation at www.PandasInternational.org.



Old Chengdu

Chengdu is a blast. The folks at the Anchor Bar, No. 6 Lin Jiang Road, serve the best breakfast, in the best atmosphere, and they will guide you to the best sites in Chengdu. They recommend Jinli and Qintai streets, bastions of old China.

I jump in a bicycle rickshaw for a local tour. My first stop is a quiet park where people picnic around a lake, float boats, feed goldfish and fly kites. Flowers bloom in the gardens; Chinese tourists stroll around, taking photos of each other under cherry blossoms.

Across the pond are the treasures at the Du Fu Thatched Cottage Museum of Chengdu. Here as everywhere are fine paintings and drawings with the pantheon of Chinese animals, and plenty of pandas.

A constant stream of people flows in and out of the gates at Jinli Street. Authentic cuisine competes with street vendors and artists. There are gambling halls and temples, and you can always find shows performing the fine Chinese arts.

"Pandas live only in China," says Luo Shengqiang, a painter at a Jinli Street gallery, "so we Chinese take the panda to be something we own." Tigers, dragons and pandas are painted, and every mountain scene reminds me of Wolong. "But in Chinese literature it is rare to find anyone talking about pandas."

The Wu Hou Shrine abutting Jinli street was erected in 223 A.D. The shrine covers 140,000 square meters and centuries of history, and you will find it a new experience each time you go.

Chengdu's famed Qintai Street is fancy restaurants, fancy cars, fancy diamonds, but the symbolism of wildlife and feng shui remain. Written on the pavement I find: "The green dragon, the white tiger, the scarlet bird and the black warrior (maybe a tortoise or snake) are the guardian spirits of the heaven in the East, West, South and North and they will protect the heaven."



THE SHE-BEAR OF WOLONG

After two days at Wolong's Giant Panda Garden I am getting to know the captive pandas, some. I have seen no panda cubs, only adults and subadults, but all pandas mesmerize and surprise. Chew bamboo, sleep, chew bamboo... Roll up in a ball, crash into and maul each other.

A big male rockets up a tree, pokes his head over a branch and... he is sleeping? A preposterous position! His playmate chases him, stands upright, rakes the tree with his claws, looks up, walks away, sits down... chews bamboo. We both lose interest in the tree-sleeping bear.

On the panda playground are 13 panda cubs playing like schoolchildren at recess. Little bundles of joy, they roll head-over-heels down the hill, run up, do it again. Roly-poly pandas. Some sleep, or try to sleep, until they are bitten on the ear, or dragged by a leg. Raucous pandas. They sprawl on jungle gyms, climb trees, roll in the grass, bite, wrestle, fall over each other. Silly pandas.

Pandas on platforms frolic and tease each other. They push, roll, fall off, grip the pole, climb back on. They slip, they slide, they hug each other. Pandemonium. One panda rolls over three others and... falls...straight down...six feet... PLOP! The little bear sits on his haunches, dazed. Then he saunters across the yard, sits down, legs straight out, and chews bamboo.

I spend hours laughing at the racoonishness of lesser giant pandas and only quit when they are all asleep. Sleep, chew bamboo, sleep, chew bamboo... *The Tao of Panda*.

In another pen is a big she-bear on countdown to breeding. "Number 20" paces around her cage, sniffs at her own scent posts, rubs her hindquarters against walls. She stands up, hugs the steel door, looks me in the eye, and then drops down and swaggers off. Upright, she looks like a circus clown in a bear costume. Her big arms hug the bars, and then she turns and scores the whitewashed walls.

Decades of failure have taught Wolong's panda experts

Facing page: The giant panda is an expert tree-climber and often sleeps or lollygags in the limbs of trees high off the ground, seemingly unmindful of the risk. Less than 1,600 giant pandas remain in the wild.





the precision of panda breeding. They have watched and timed and recorded Number 20 for hours, days, weeks. Soon they will bring a male into her cage. These brief sexual encounters are not always friendly.

Number 20 moans, whimpers, barks like a dog. When she bellows from the depth of her belly the deep sound echoes across the turquoise river and through the valley. It is a sad, lonely bellowing, amplified by the threat of extinction.

I have been watching Number 20 circle her cage, and when she turns toward the front I duck into the bamboo, press my camera up to the bars of the steel door—just as she arrives—and press my face to the viewfinder.

I never saw it coming. Her paw whips between the bars and swipes my chest. I don't know what I do next, because I am stunned. Number 20 sits down and chews on a plastic fastener stripped from my jacket by her claws. Underneath my shirt are red stripes—claw marks. My chest is throbbing, but there's no blood and my clothes are not torn.

The subtlest of subtleties, this is the gateway to all mysteries, wrote Lao-tzu, in the *Tao-te Ching*. Indeed, the big she-bear sent me a subtle message—a subtle swipe—a reminder of the Tao.

TEN AXES FOR EVERY HOE

My last day in Wolong is a day of yang (water energy) dynamism. I walk to Wolong town, upstream along the Pitiao River. The sun is shining. The dragons of Wolong reflect sunlight, swallow it, toy with it. Waterfalls, swirling pools... a quick plunge into the chill turquoise river moves the *chi* in one's body... *the Tao of skinny-dipping*.

It is spring in Wolong and the pussy willows are fuzzy. Cows chew spring's first grasses. Fields are plowed with anticipation and sweat. A local man, arms waving, shows how the dragons hurl boulders down the steep slopes, how the houses shake, and the people do, how the boulders scatter the sheep, and crash against barns.

Some 6,000 minority people live here. The stewards of pandas, they live poor and simply, but have no say in the drama of international species protection. Yet their lives remain full of hope and promise. Farmers work fields together, and some haul truckloads of fresh bamboo to the panda center.

Some say the Qiang were once a powerful agricultural people of the north. Defeated in battle, they migrated south, beat the local Ko-jen tribe with clubs and white stones. Every Qiang had an animal for a guardian spirit, and Qiang priests kept the skull of the golden monkey in remembrance of the tribe's sacred texts. The white stone remains a fortuitous symbol.

Knock on doors or poke your head into courtyards, and the people take you by hand into modest homes and seduce

you with sweet tea, hot soup and smoked pork. You leave with full belly, warmed heart, and cracking smile.

The Wolong Nature Reserve was gazetted to protect disappearing panda habitat. Logging, agriculture, poaching, human population and development all claim panda habitat. *Ten axes for every hoe*, says a Chinese proverb, but new reserves have sprung up, and conservation has been declared a top priority. Every panda born at Wolong is celebrated, and they have produced 45 surviving cubs since 1991. "But there are less than 1,600 pandas left in the wild," Peter Wood said.

"I greatly admire China's efforts in panda conservation," George Schaller tells me. "With the creation of new reserves, protection of habitat and success in captive breeding, the future for pandas looks bright. I hope, however, that the peace and beauty of the panda's home in Wolong and elsewhere will not be disturbed by too much tourist development."

Another subtle reminder of the Tao: harmony, and balance.

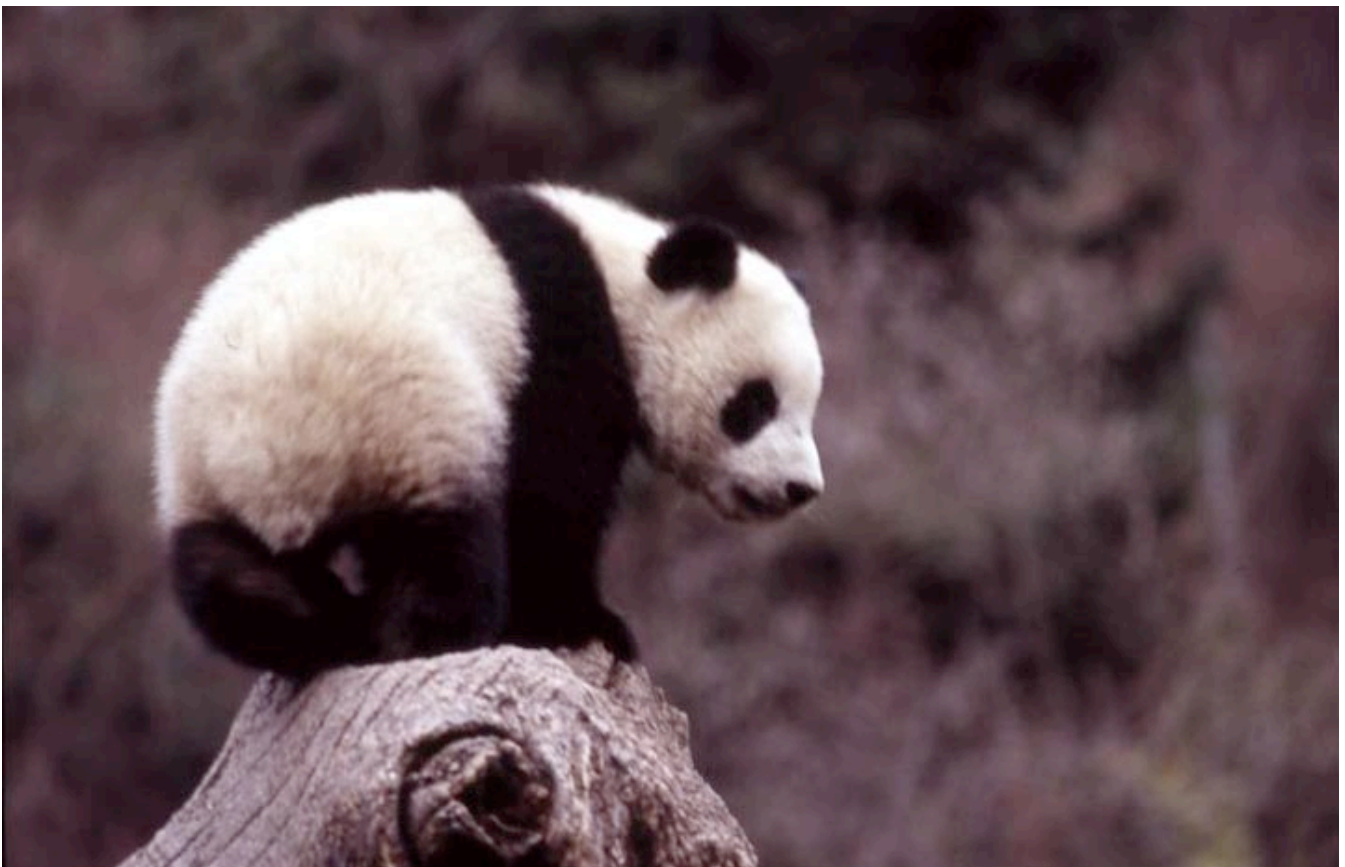
AFTERNOON DELIGHT

When I arrived at Wolong, 15 pandas remained to be bred. The big she-bear that swiped me was one. The afternoon of my last day, she is very active. I find Dr. Li and his team



Sharing the mountains of Wolong are Yi and Qiang tribespeople (below), and other Tibetan minorities, who open their hearts and doors to visitors from afar; (facing page) baby pandas are best observed at the Panda Garden of the Wolong Nature Reserve research base; watching them is like watching a circus.





watching this female from the courtyard.

“Panda breeding is very difficult,” Dr. Li says. “If they stay together too long they will fight. Our center has spent 12 years to overcome the difficulties in breeding. Not every facility can breed pandas with success. We have found the best time to put two pandas together. We can tell by the sound of the voices.”

The females are isolated during estrus, March to May, and rapport must be established before females and males can be united. Two cubs are born, but the mother rejects one. And pandas will kill and sometimes eat their own young. “Pandas can be very aggressive,” says Dr. Li.

I tell Dr. Li how Number 20 took a swipe at me. “You must stay behind the fence,” he says, alarmed. “You usually cannot approach a female panda. It is dangerous. Sometimes they will attack.”

Suddenly everyone is focused on the big she-bear: they are bringing a big male in. Two researchers stand on the roof: one holds a long pole to prod or poke the pandas if there is trouble. The gate swings open and the male enters.

Male pandas will draw blood—“roaring and tussling,” observed George Schaller—over a female in heat. Male territories often overlap, but female pandas are solitary and defensive of their range. “It appears that males, too, must come into heat before showing an interest in females,” wrote George Schaller, at a time when panda breeding was all guesswork. “Male and female must synchronize their courtship, a harmony that for unknown reasons captive pairs usually fail to achieve.”

The pandas are excited. The researchers are tense. The pandas copulate, then separate. Number 20 roars and swipes the male. The she-bear circles the pen. They come together again and stay joined for 30 seconds. Then, it’s over. A gate opens and the male exits before the fight. The humans are thrilled.

“Our government is spending much money and many people on panda conservation,” says Dr. Li, after a serious exchange with his team. “I want more people to know about our work. It is very exciting.”

How serendipitous was my timing! I walked into town, walked back, arrived to see two pandas mating. “You are very lucky to see two pandas mating,” says Dr. Li. “It is very, very lucky for you.”

It’s not luck, I think; it’s the Tao. When we don’t try too hard, and we just let things be, things happen by themselves, spontaneously. “It’s feng shui,” I tell Dr. Li, laughing. “Good fortune, long life—the hidden dragon of Wolong.”

ANA serves Chengdu daily from Fukuoka and Sun.–Fri. from Narita via code-share flights with Air China.

