



A Volunteer's Personal Account

The following is a personal account from Chet Chin of Malaysia of her recent volunteer experience at Bifengxia. The information and photos are correct as of August 2008, but the situation is still in a state of flux and there could have been more changes since Chet left.

Chet is also a member of the Pandas Unlimited group, who contributed a \$ 5,000 individual annual adoption of Wen Yu. This is the entire cost to care for a panda for one year. Wen Yu was the last cub born to Mao Mao, the panda who was lost in the earthquake, so she is a very special reminder of Mao Mao.



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New home but same "old" love and devotion for the precious pandas

After the devastating earthquake on May 12, followed by numerous strong aftershocks, the Wolong Panda Centre made a decision to relocate its panda population to various zoos and panda reserves around China. The majority of the pandas were moved to its sister reserve, the Bifengxia Panda Base, which had been set up in 2003 "to secure the safety of the entire population as a whole." (*Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda* official guidebook).

I was in Bifengxia as a volunteer between 1 and 11 August. I had originally planned to go to Wolong and had in fact purchased my air ticket in early May. A few days later, an earthquake of 7.9 magnitude hit the Sichuan area in China, where Wolong is located. Wolong itself was affected to the point where it was temporarily cut off from the outside world. But I held onto my air ticket in the hope that the Centre would be reopened closer to the date of my departure. When it was confirmed that Wolong would not reopen anytime soon, and that its pandas and their keepers would be relocated to Bifengxia, along with the volunteer



Wowotou bread, carrots and apples waiting to be loaded onto the delivery van

programme, I followed suit. For my first couple of days in Bifengxia, I felt a little bewildered, especially by the size of the place. Having been to Wolong the previous September, I found Bifengxia to be bigger - so much bigger - than Wolong. I soon found myself comparing the two places.

In Wolong, everything was within walking distance. The research centre, the Wolong Panda Club office and the volunteers' office were located in the same building, with the bakery / kitchen and bamboo store room nearby. In Bifengxia, these three facilities are located in different buildings not exactly within walking distance of one another, while the bakery / kitchen and bamboo store room are at the Research Centre.

The giant panda residents, too, are housed in four locations in Bifengxia - White Bear Ground, Leopard Mountain, Nursery / Kindergarten, and Research Centre. Every morning, their food provisions (fresh bamboo, *wowotou* bamboo bread, carrots and apples) for the day would be collected from the Research Centre and delivered on a van to the other three locations. Throughout the day, more fresh bamboo supplies would be delivered the same way. Even the leftover bamboo, which were collected and carted off by the respective keepers in Wolong, are tied up and left outside the panda enclosures to be collected by the keeper on duty for the day.



Vanful of fresh bamboo and other goodies for the pandas throughout Bifengxia

To get from one location to the next, there is a transport service for visitors, as well as private cars owned by the senior staff and various work vehicles for the other staff. In addition to the distance between the various facilities, the hilly nature of the Base often makes for a strenuous walk. I was to discover this one afternoon when I walked from the Research Centre to the Nursery / Kindergarten (an uphill walk most of the way), to arrive at the Centre almost soaked with perspiration. In contrast, the walk between the Panda Club office and the Research Centre was less strenuous and took only six minutes for me.



These two vehicles take visitors between the various facilities on the Base



View of the main walking path from the Nursery / Kindergarten; straight ahead is the Research Centre while to the left is White Bear Ground



Steps inside White Bear Ground

To balance the differences I saw between Wolong and Bifengxia, I found myself looking for similarities between the two places. There were two in particular - the bridge and the souvenir stalls. Just like at Wolong, a bridge leads to the main entrance to Bifengxia, although a much shorter bridge which spans a mere pond and not a river. There are also various souvenir stalls across the entrance to Bifengxia which sell the usual tourist requirements - food, drinks and little souvenir items - but not local ethnic handicraft items that the Wolong souvenir stalls used to offer.

While Bifengxia had bewildered me during my first two days there, I had felt at home almost from my first minute in Wolong the previous year. I had volunteered in Wolong for four days in September 2007. Those four days were a dream come true for me, my "once-in-a-lifetime" trip that I thought I would probably



A short bridge across a pond leads to the entrance of Bifengxia Panda Base

never make again. I was wrong. As soon as I stepped into Wolong that morning of 8 September 2007, I told myself I wanted to return, not just again, but again and again, at least once every year.

This year's trip was the return I'd promised myself almost a year ago, although it was not to Wolong, but to Bifengxia. As I was to find out during my 11 days in Bifengxia, the place may be different, but the devotion of the Wolong keepers to the black and white charges under them remains the same. In fact, this devotion is even stronger as the keepers have had to show extra tender loving care for these much loved pandas who have been traumatised by the earthquake and bounced around during the long and bumpy journey from Wolong.



Souvenir stalls across from the entrance sell the usual tourist requirements of food, drinks and panda soft toys



Keeper returning one-year-old to enclosure



Close ties between a keeper and his panda as he brings the wowotou bread right to the panda's mouth

The Wolong keepers have also had to settle into their new home in Bifengxia. Many of them have left their families behind to follow their beloved pandas in order to continue caring for them. It is a testimony of their love and devotion that they have settled very quickly in Bifengxia and are working very well with their new colleagues, too.

Bifengxia, too, has had to deal with an extended panda family comprising its own pandas and the pandas from Wolong. Since its opening in 2003, Bifengxia has been home mainly to elderly pandas retired from Wolong, as well as female pandas not in the breeding programme for a particular year. It did not have sufficient enclosures for its combined panda population with Wolong, but construction was quickly started on both temporary (wooden) and permanent (brick) enclosures. To date, 17 sets of wooden



enclosures have been completed, with eight sets sterilised and occupied by mid August, while 20 brick enclosures are being built and expected to be ready by mid October.

Hua Mei and Mei Sheng are neighbours in these temporary enclosures at the Research Centre; if you look closely, you can see her legs beneath the fencing of her outdoor enclosure

Pandas International is currently working with a graphic designer to come up with a terrific tee shirt in memory of Mao Mao.



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Under construction—permanent brick enclosures expected to be ready by mid October

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