

When Not Laughing, Fortuna Only Smiles

by strannikov

This twenty-second century CE is not commencing in anything like a propitious manner, and we all know why: it is plainly the fault of the giant panda, of every damned Ailuropod born in the past century. Equally, we might say that all our fresh troubles are the direct consequence of five wildly unanticipated events from the twenty-first century.

The first was the outbreak of the Chinese Urban Revolt of 2019. The teeming millions in many of China's largest cities had been coached steadily by Beijing's Communist princes to compete with their rivals in other large Chinese cities, and the respective citizenries took to the directives with alarming enthusiasm. In the second year of the novel domestic policy, cadres from Beijing descended on Tianjin and trashed as much of the city as possible: some hundreds of thousands spread the mayhem as far south as Nanjing and Shanghai. Refugees and evacuees from increasingly depopulated coastal cities migrated inland to displace comparatively defenseless rural populations, who in turn fled deeper into the Chinese interior by the tens of millions. Disruptions were exacerbated by wild weather, and by the end of 2018 the nation was aflame in widespread civil unrest.

These circumstances permitted the brief flourishing of a thriving market in panda smuggling. Western biologists and naturalists took advantage of the momentary lapse of export restrictions and smuggled principally into and through Burma (known formerly as Myanmar) at first dozens, then remaining hundreds of pandas for what were judged "precautionary measures" by the Presidium of the UN's Directorate of Agriculture. Most of the smuggled pandas made their way to laboratory and zoological facilities on Australia's south coast, which was becoming dependably

lush as all threats of drought steadily diminished. Had bamboo forests not begun to flourish all across formerly arid Australia, perhaps nothing amiss would have occurred: but as the bamboo flourished, so did the pandas, especially in the years after 2033, when genetically modified panda breeding commenced in earnest. Pandas were removed from global lists of endangered species for the last time in 2040, and by 2060, Australia's panda population far exceeded the resident human population, so much so that the Aussies began exporting pandas, even back to the remaining Chinese.

Panda plantations began thriving all along Australia's southern periphery, to the extent that by 2070 panda consumption was deemed not only possible but advisable as soon as the survival of Australia's extensive bamboo forests became a concern. Tentatively (human awe at the terminal cuteness of giant pandas had to be overcome but took much less time and effort than could have been predicted scant decades earlier), the Ailuropods were found to have the gamey flavor you'd expect, the texture of the meat commonly compared to that of kangaroo tail, the popular preparations of panda flesh requiring lots of lard or vegetable oil, because of the lack of fat the pandas derived from their continued diet of bamboo, although by 2080 "panda-on-a-stick" had emerged as a global culinary fashion (bamboo skewers de rigueur), commonly dipped in some manner of Worcestershire sauce.

By 2090, you may recall, panda was everywhere: panda pelts for clothing, panda rugs galore, panda claws and teeth in personal jewelry (earrings and belt buckles, chiefly) and home decoration (wired and animated panda heads with functional mandibles were a huge hit in the Christmas buying seasons of 2091 and 2092), panda paws mounted for good luck and for door knockers (their numbers becoming limitless, no one bewailed the poor luck of the pandas that continued to thrive to the point of threatening the bamboo preserves): a visitor from the preceding century would have been aghast to the point of vomiting to behold the regard with which pandas were now held almost universally.

And as we now know, the first cases of Ailuropod Spongiform Encephalopathy were not documented until 2099, by which time almost all the planet's consumers of panda flesh were infected, panda consumption itself implicating well over half of our groaning populations of humans. (The most miniscule of minute tweaks in refined VLSV panda genome sequencing back in 2028 [Meerschaum, et al.] is now understood to have been chiefly responsible: the error was intentional, it now seems, to avert development of a species of carnivorous pandas.) Mortality rates of over ninety percent ensued, and no treatment or cure has yet been developed. Suffice it to say, human appreciation for pandas has not risen commensurately, and just last month the depredations in the original Adelaide Panda and Bamboo Preserve came to light, with tens of thousands of panda carcasses washing up as close and as far off as the shores of Tasman Island and Zealand, along with discovery that bamboo forests are being leveled by the hectare to starve the cuddly survivors.

Thus as our new century commences, pandas are among the world's most detested creatures, leaving all to wonder how they were ever viewed benevolently: ahhh, if only the species had been permitted to go extinct, seven billion people today might face the normal prospect of a six-score-and-ten lifetime.

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