

France bids farewell to giant panda

By Chen Weihua in Saint-Aignan-sur-Cher, France | China Daily | Updated: 2023-07-26 09:27



People wave goodbye as a truck transporting Yuan Meng, the first panda to be born in France, leaves Beauval Zoo in Saint-Aignan-sur-Cher, France, on Tuesday. Yuan Meng was flown from Paris to Chengdu, Sichuan province, later that day. GUILLAUME SOUVANT/AFP

French first lady Brigitte Macron bid farewell to Yuan Meng at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris on Tuesday afternoon shortly before the first giant panda born in France took off on a 12-hour flight to Chengdu, Sichuan province, to join a panda breeding and conservation program.

As Yuan Meng's "godmother" since his birth on Aug 4, 2017, Brigitte visited the panda at Beauval Zoo in central France in May after hearing about his upcoming departure. She announced the name Yuan Meng, which means "dreams come true" in Chinese, at a ceremony in December 2017.

Giant pandas born outside China belong to China and must be sent to join the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding when they are between 2 and 4 years old. Yuan Meng's departure at age 4 had been delayed for almost two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early Tuesday morning, crowds gathered outside Beauval Zoo to say goodbye as an air-conditioned truck carrying Yuan Meng departed for the Paris airport.

The day before, throngs of people came for the "Last Breakfast" event organized by the zoo to visit the panda one last time.

Celine Gracia, her husband and two children came from Dijon, about 400 kilometers away, for the event.

"It's an amazing event because it's the last day for the panda, and there is such a big crowd," Gracia said as Yuan Meng frolicked in his courtyard and sat down to eat bamboo.

Rodolphe Delord, president and CEO of the zoo, talked about the love that the French have for the bears.

"The public is passionate about giant pandas here in France, and I believe it's global passion, so it's truly an incredible event," he said. "The conservation of the species is of utmost importance to us."

Delord revealed that the French first lady had called him to ask about Yuan Meng.

"I have invited her to accompany me to Sichuan to see him," he said.

Beauval Zoo, which is ranked the fourth most beautiful zoo in the world by online travel portal TripAdvisor, now has four giant pandas since Yuan Meng departed. Delord said he hopes another cub will be born soon.

"I believe having those giant pandas here can only strengthen the relationship between the two countries. Having those giant pandas here also helps raise public awareness about endangered species," he said.

Lu Shaye, Chinese ambassador to France, agreed, saying that giant pandas in France "symbolize the friendship between the two nations".

Lu, who visited the zoo in August 2019 on his first trip outside Paris shortly after arriving for the job, said he has mixed feelings about Yuan Meng's departure.

"Yuan Meng is leaving France, and I can feel the French people's unwillingness to say goodbye," he said. "I hope Yuan Meng will continue to be an envoy of friendship between the two countries and carry on spreading goodwill."

Jerome Pouille, who was the "Pambassador" working at the giant panda base in Sichuan in 2012, came to the zoo from Toulouse for the Monday event. He currently runs the website panda.fr, which is dedicated to spreading giant panda information around the world.

"It's always sad to say goodbye to a friend, but it's a very good thing for him to join his ancestral land. He will live in the Chengdu panda base that I know very well.

"This is a green place in the suburbs of Chengdu with several very natural enclosures. It has some of the best Chinese giant panda experts and keepers, and he will be

well treated with plenty of bamboo."