

*Black, White, and Red*

“WOOSH!” roar the engines of the red and white airplane as it circles around the city of Chengdu.

Approaching Chengdu by air, I look down at the lush vegetation in the distant mountains, and one word comes to my mind. Pandas. As the plane circles around Chengdu one last time before landing, I look over at the city, and see skyscrapers popping out of the forests like nails through a board. On every building, the sunset reflects on the window, which blinds my eyes, so I pull the window back down.

As the sun sets, the night markets of Chengdu spring to life. Immediately, the bright glow of the lights is strikingly noticeable. Walking through them, I see everything from arcade machines to restaurants. However, a strong whiff of smoke and grease fills the air, and cigarette butts lay on the streets. In the back alleys, air conditioner units drip water.

“Plip, Plop, Plip Plop...”

Walking through the sea of people, I notice through every restaurant, bright, warm lights flicker with hundreds of people talking around and having a good time. In the streets, the sound of vendors shouting for people to shop echoes in the crowd, with music blasting from claw machines that are randomly situated in the street.

“Sausages!... Best Food!... Free Samples!”

Walking into a random restaurant, my family settles down and orders some food. We specifically ask for less spices. But, since this is Sichuan (known for its spicy food), there is little use to ask for less spices. Apparently, spicy is extreme and less spicy is spicy. After the extremely spicy dinner, I walk away with a burning tongue and desire for more and more water. Throughout the night, rain spills out of the clouds and is continuously dumping it on Chengdu. In the hotel room, there is a large window at the end of the room, and looking down, I feel as if I am free falling.

The main reason we came, though, is because Chengdu is known for its panda reserves. Walking through the reserve, it feels like I am in a paradise. All around, the abundant jade-green vegetation fills the mountains, with birds calling in the air. There are not many wild pandas around this zoo, but they have extremely large enclosures, so through the lime bamboo, I see pandas poking in and out, enjoying themselves in the cool weather. At each enclosure, there is a small description sign that states the name of the panda, gender, and age. The Chengdu Zoo’s panda reserve is located on a hill, so there are many different slopes. At one bridge, it hangs from one side to another, I shiver and cross the bridge. In the middle, my mom suddenly wants my sister and I to stand and take a picture, and so I stand and wait on the swaying bridge.

“Flash!” goes the camera.

I blink.

Though staying on the bridge is creepy, it is actually a very interesting view, being able to see the pandas from above, exercising their daily activities.

Walking into a building, I look through a glass panel, and see around a dozen cute, fluffy little pandas, rolling around on the floor and playing with their toys. Everyone gapes at the pandas, and the room is filled with the heat everybody is giving off. As we walk back outside of the building, I breathe in a breath of fresh air, reminding me how stuffy it was in the building.

As the day wears on, I get hungrier and hungrier, and it is finally time for lunch, and we settle down in a shop next to the lake in the center of the zoo. Black swans and birds fly by, calling to each other as they land in the rippling water. Standing next to the gravel path, there is a red shack that serves lunch. The paint on its roof is peeling off, and steam through the back door, drifting in the wind. Overlooking the lake, is a hill that consists of a large, golden panda statue that smiles down happily at tourists. Its golden paint reflects in the lake, and with the sun shining right on top of it, it seems as if the color is spreading in every direction. As the simmering fish soup and rice arrive at our table, the fish is coated in a layer of chili sauce, and it smells delicious! My sister and I immediately dig in, but, this is Sichuan, so the food ends up being a lot more spicier than I had expected. As a result, I end up panting for over half an hour after lunch from the spices, and I continue to drink water to try and stop the tingling spices in my mouth.

Near the end of the day, we get to sit next to the chubby, black and white, fluffy pandas with their short stubby tails and a circle of black around their eyes. As it slowly crawls out of the cage munching on some bamboo, everybody stares in awe and immediately starts to line up to put on their clear blue coats to take precautions against the pandas. With its short fur tingling in the air, and yellowish-white teeth grinding on the marsh green bamboo, the panda is guided by a zookeeper onto a metal bench to let us hug and take photos with it. As my mom, sister, and I walk up to the panda, I do something that I will regret for the rest of my life. Shivering, because I am too scared to hug the panda, I STAND behind it instead of hugging it. My dad tries to urge me to sit with the panda, stating this is a once in a lifetime experience, but I ignore him.

Soon, it is time to leave the panda reserve, and I cannot yet bear to leave this interesting and cool zoo. As the zoo starts closing for the day, my family and I start leaving and soon, we are back in the hotel. As night comes, the zoo lights flicker off, and people start going home in their cars, leaving the city to itself.

Years later, when I think about my trip to Chengdu, I think about three vivid colors: black, white, and red.