

Wolong Nature Reserve, China, 19 February 2007

CHINESE NEW YEAR

Wolong; Crouching Dragon,
mountains of mist and legend,
cascade and abyss,
where golden eagles
hunt golden monkeys.

Living masterpieces of Chinese watercolour,
they enchanted Victorian botanist E. H. Wilson,
priest-zoologist Pere David
and modern scientists
George Schaller and Hu Jinchu.

Tibetan farmers grow cabbages
on stone-walled terraces;
hauling rocks, dirt, compost and cabbages
up steep fields of boulders
cast carelessly down
by the Crouching Dragons above.

Round Tibetan faces
stare down from farmhouses
of wood and stone;
from woods that once
sheltered mythical beasts:
giant panda, red panda,
blond takin, golden monkey
and iridescent pheasant;
woods of fir, cryptomeria, maple,
rhododendron and bamboo;
especially umbrella bamboo,
panda's main meal.

Children in windows
wave in new coats
of bright pink, orange,
yellow and lavender.
Calls of "Xinnian Kuaile!"
come from the faces,
"Happy New Year!"

An old woman
with a black turban
and cloudy eyes
and a man
with a sketchy moustache
and solid smile
Give me peanut brittle candy.
"Xinnian Kuaile!"

Giant pandas,
big bamboo-eating bears,
ranged across southern
and western China,
in mountain snows
and subtropical forests.
People came much later.

Today pandas survive
only in inaccessible mountain forests,
doomed by wood cutting,
bamboo die-back and
genetic isolation.

Government,
aided by international experts,
developed a panda breeding center
at Wolong,
banned logging,
and seeks jobs
for farmers and woodcutters
using panda power.

Wild pandas have round faces too,
but aren't social.
These laconic beasts
with iconic faces,
the ad man's dream,
are world-class logos
for wildlife conservation
and Chinese tourism;
the Nation's treasure,
perhaps someday
replacing Mao
with "Da Xiongmao",
"giant panda".

Wolong Panda Base is bursting.
Doungkoucao,
with its farms, terraces, streams
and boulder fields,
will become a panda-based attraction,
replacing logging
with eco-tourism
replacing low-profit cabbages
with high-profit pandas.

Not a zoo,
it will become
a panda's fantasy forest,
where thirty baby pandas play
and forty big pandas
crunch endless canes of bamboo,
sleep, breed, and feed again
in panda paradise;
winning adulation, protection and prosperity
from millions of Chinese
and international
eco-tourists.

In the farmhouses
Tibetan farmers smile
because they're Tibetan
and because they expect
to get good prices
for their farms
and good jobs
growing pandas and tourists
instead of cutting wood
on lonely mountainsides
or replacing stones
with cabbages.

"Xinnian Kuaile!"