

Songster, E. Elena: *Panda Nation. The Construction and Conservation of China's Modern Icon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018. ISBN: 9780199393671; XIV, 249 S.

**Rezensioniert von:** Hajo Frölich, Berlin

Why is it that, even without the subtitle, no one will have to think twice which nation a book carrying „panda“ in its title is referring to? How could an animal barely known to humanity around 1900 rise to become a global superstar over the course of just a few decades? Perhaps to the disappointment of advocates of animal agency, E. Elena Songster primarily credits Chinese scientists and politicians with promoting the obscure Sichuanese hermit as a globalized icon of the People's Republic of China (PRC) intended to symbolize a scientific, environmentally conscious and loveable nation. It was thus less the animal itself – a cute, easily recognizable and seemingly peaceful supposed vegetarian – but rather the timing of its appearance which made possible its co-evolution: as China rose, so did the panda.

The book's eight chapters guide the reader from the late-nineteenth-century „discovery“ of the giant panda all the way to its current status as a controversial symbol of China's cultural diplomacy. In 1869, the French priest and naturalist Armand David had local hunters in Sichuan shoot a „black and white bear“ for him. But was it really a bear? In Songster's convincing interpretation, the ensuing (and ongoing) international taxonomic controversy turned out to be crucial for the animal's career. This was, firstly, because the panda defied existing categories – was it a bear, a raccoon, or perhaps, as frustrated scientists suggested, simply „a panda“? And secondly, because it could not be identified in China's rich and centuries-old literature on animals either.

Puzzling scientists but soon charming crowds (zoos first exhibited giant pandas in Europe and the USA in the late 1930s, and in China in 1953), the panda aroused intense interest internationally. Yet it was indigenous only to the area now known as China, as fossil findings dating back more than one million years proved. Songster shows how in the 1950s, the government of the young PRC jum-

ped at the occasion presented by the panda. The animal not only allowed Beijing to identify the territory of imperial China as that of the Chinese nation-state. To Beijing, the panda provided a natural „bridge between the present and a very distant past“ of the Chinese nation (p. 28). It also enabled the Party to teach the masses about the benefits of a „scientific“, empirical approach to reality, and it gave Chinese scientists the chance to finally become leaders in a specific field of study.

The next chapters examine the role of environmental protection during China's rapid industrialization. The creation of China's first nature reserve, in 1956, demonstrates that at the time, nature protection was primarily a concern of scientists. It was only as a result of the famine created by the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) that poaching came to be seen as a threat. In 1962, the giant panda, despite being worthless in economic terms, was nevertheless heading a list of 19 „precious and rare“ species not to be hunted at all. Three years later, the first nature reserve specifically for the protection of the panda was established at Wanglang, Sichuan province. Songster thus paints a more nuanced picture of Maoist China's attitude towards wild animals than previous research has done.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising findings of the book relate to the Cultural Revolution. In 1967, despite the chaos prevailing in other places, Chinese scientists and government officials undertook a systematic survey of Wanglang's panda population. And since the panda had been void of symbolic meaning, it became the perfect incarnation of the „new content“ in literature and art which Mao Zedong had already called for in the 1940s. Representing China but not the country's „semi-feudal, semi-colonial“ past, the giant panda quickly became a favorite art motif as well as a brand name for diverse products.

Panda diplomacy, which probably had the largest impact on the animal's road to international fame, also began during the Cultural Revolution, with the arrival of Hsing Hsing and Ling Ling to the United States in 1972. The two were followed by another 21 pan-

<sup>1</sup> Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature. Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, Cambridge 2001.

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das presented as gifts to countries ranging from Japan to Mexico. For Songster, this period transformed the panda from „a symbol of extreme nationalism and self-reliance“ into a tool „useful to China by helping the nation reach out to engage the world“ (p. 84). Yet beyond this well-known story, Songster also looks at how panda diplomacy further decimated the wild population, from which almost all of the gift pandas were taken.

Just how much of a „national treasure“ the animal by now was became clear in 1976. That year saw a major bamboo die-off which starved more than 100 pandas. Authorities on all levels of government reacted quickly to save the surviving ones. This event repeated itself in 1983, when thanks to broad media coverage, donations also poured in both from across the nation and foreign countries.

The reform era led to conflicts between panda preservation and economic profit. In the late 1990s, inspired by the WWF – which had chosen the panda as its logo upon its founding in 1961 – but ultimately fostered by a logging ban in response to the Yangzi flood of 1998, ecotourism was introduced as an alternative, less harmful source of income for the local Baima people at Wanglang. The growth of China’s middle class, however, made ecotourism at reserves across the country so successful that the „eco“ aspect came under threat and many Baima people turned to ethnic tourism instead.

The growth of China’s economic and political power was also reflected in the further development of panda diplomacy. In 1984, Beijing shifted from giving away its „national treasure“ as a gift and to a program of international short-term loans instead. Criticism from animal activists abroad, however, led the government to limit short-term panda exhibits to China while internationally, costly long-term loans which must include some scientific component have taken their place. Despite all the money involved, pandas continue to be treated as first-rate diplomatic issues, as Songster vividly demonstrates with regard to Taiwan and the heavily disputed acceptance of two pandas by president Ma Ying-jeou in 2009: The couple did not come on loan but as a gift, implying that this was not an international but domestic affair.

All in all, E. Elena Songster has written a condensed account of the rise of China seen through, as Songster herself puts it, one of its „byproducts“. Like no one before her<sup>2</sup>, Songster is able to explain why it is the panda and not, for example, the golden snub-nosed monkey (also endemic to China) which has risen to become the PRC’s global icon. Certainly, Songster could have chosen to place more emphasis on the panda’s behavior and thus on animal agency. Devoting more space to the Republic of China (1912–1949) would have allowed for a portrayal of the panda’s as well as China’s entire twentieth-century trajectory. Yet by choosing instead to tell the multifaceted story of how humans constructed and conserved this particular species, Songster is able to speak to a much wider audience interested in China’s political, social, cultural and environmental history. To all of them, and in fact to readers looking for an unusual entry into modern Chinese history per se, „Panda Nation“ can be highly recommended. That these days, judging from book covers and illustrations, outside observers prefer to (again) depict China as a dragon nation only testifies to the fact that as the country’s rise continues, so does the construction of the icons referring to it.

HistLit 2019-3-052 / Hajo Frölich über Songster, E. Elena: *Panda Nation. The Construction and Conservation of China’s Modern Icon*. Oxford 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 01.08.2019.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Harper, *The Cultural History of the Giant Panda (Ailuropoda melanoleuca) in Early China*, in: *Early China* 35–36 (2012–2013), pp. 185–224; Henry Nicolls, *The Way of the Panda. The Curious History of China’s Political Animal*, London 2010; George B. Schaller, *The Last Panda*, Chicago 1993; Ramona Morris / Desmond Morris, *Men and Pandas*, New York 1966.