

Ri Ri and Shin Shin

Pull in the Crowds

"It's so cute!"

There are cries of glee from young and old alike as they gaze at a giant panda, sitting down and munching its way through the bamboo grasped in its hands. It is a weekday towards the end of April, but there are still crowds of people gathered around the panda enclosure at Ueno Zoo in Taito Ward, Tokyo.

After closing its gates due to issues such as power outages, transport disruption and aftershocks in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake, Ueno Zoo reopened on April 1 and unveiled two new arrivals, in the form of a five-year-old male panda named Ri Ri and a five-year-old female named Shin Shin, both of which were brought to the zoo from a conservation center in China's Sichuan province in February.

This is the first time that Ueno Zoo has had giant pandas on display to the public since its male panda Ling Ling died in April 2008.

The major tremors that struck Tokyo as a result of the Great East Japan Earthquake frightened the two pandas, leaving them so agitated that they kept running around the inside area of the enclosure for a time afterwards. The two Chinese keepers who came over to Japan with the pandas reassured their anxious Japanese counterparts however, explaining that "the Great Sichuan Earthquake was even worse, so they'll be just fine." Just by coincidence, both pandas and Chinese keepers also experienced the massive earthquake that hit Sichuan province in May 2008.

Sure enough, the pair calmed down before long and got back to eating bamboo, paying little attention to the aftershocks.

"They're so cute, just like cuddly toys!" exclaims a woman in her thirties who has come to the zoo for the day from Hamamatsu in Shizuoka Prefecture with her husband, daughter and mother. "All the news about the earthquake leaves you feeling really depressed, so seeing the pandas is a great breath of fresh air."

The sight of these two laid-back, adorable pandas that have survived two major earthquakes is proving heartening to the Japanese public as they get on with the reconstruction process.

Ueno Zoo is also collecting donations for the Great East Japan Earthquake and intends to use the proceeds to provide assistance in affected areas and support for zoos, aquariums and other such facilities damaged by the earthquake.



The arrival of the new giant pandas has drawn thousands of visitors to Ueno Zoo.

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