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During Fu Bao's almost four-year residency at Everland, the park welcomed 5.5 million visitors, roughly equivalent to 10 percent of South Korea's population. In the countdown to the cub's departure, the facility saw a daily peak of 8,000 visitors.

Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, Japan, also saw success with panda Xiang Xiang, whose presence there from 2017 to February last year contributed an estimated $359 million to the local economy.

These parks have shown that pandas can bring substantial economic benefits. The key factor lies in telling panda stories effectively, establishing them as intellectual property, and utilizing the internet strategically, says Chui. He maintains that despite the global and regional presence of pandas, those in Hong Kong can retain their allure if their stories are well told.

Ocean Park, renowned for its marine attractions and recreational amenities, has yet to make full use of its panda resources. "Now, it's their last chance," he says.

Learning from Chengdu

Perry Yiu Pak-leung, who represents the tourism sector in the Legislative Council and is chairman of China Travel Service (Hong Kong), agrees that the "panda economy" is promising.

"Many Hong Kong people have doubts about the 'panda economy', but how many of them have been to Chengdu to experience it personally?" he asks. Having visited the nation's "panda capital" recently, Yiu says he has seen the significant role pandas play in driving consumption in the city.

Panda-related businesses are ubiquitous in Chengdu. During last year's May Day holidays, more than 264,000 tourists visited the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, making it the country's second-most visited site. With an entrance fee of about 50 yuan ($7), the base stimulated spending on public services like transportation and hotel accommodation, with about 1,450 yuan per visitor recorded.

While Hong Kong might not be able to rival Chengdu in the sheer number of pandas and expansive habitats, Yiu says the city can take a leaf from the provincial capital. A major aspect is the design of panda venues. He was impressed by the unique features of Chengdu's panda bases that have enriched visitor experience.

While Ocean Park is rejuvenating its panda pavilion and revamping its design, Yiu suggests that the park introduce distinctive elements to lure visitors. "Could the panda pavilion in Hong Kong integrate cutting-edge technologies and leverage artificial intelligence to create the most advanced panda facility in Asia?"

Hong Kong can also draw inspiration from Chengdu to enhance the soft services at the panda pavilion. Improving visitor flows, creating a more pleasant environment, and ensuring that staff members are welcoming and knowledgeable are all necessary for improvement, says Yiu.

In addition, Yiu stresses that the core of the panda business lies in people's affection for these creatures, and the key to fostering residents' love for them hinges on how Hong Kong develops pandas' IP images.

Chengdu's panda fame, while being based on its long history of conservation, is largely due to the power of the internet. Around 2013, the city launched iPanda — an online panda channel with 24-hour live broadcasts showing the daily life of pandas. The initiative drew widespread public interest and media coverage, solidifying Chengdu's reputation as the "panda capital" and wooing substantial business.

Yiu says Hong Kong ought to do more to bring together various sectors to devise a distinctive panda IP.

Cultivating panda IP

Wong Ka-fai, co-founder and partner of Madcradle Online — a local integrated digital advertising company — believes it's vital to identify the unique attributes of pandas in creating a distinct panda IP.

Compared with pandas living in Japan, South Korea, and on the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong's pandas could stand out by showcasing their distinct personalities and characteristics, he says, suggesting that Ocean Park delve into the traits of local pandas before branding their individual images.

For instance, if a Hong Kong panda is particularly playful and enjoys tumbling, such behavior can be highlighted and marketed to forge a memorable identity.

Weaving local culture into the city's panda IP would also help, he says.

Chui envisions a narrative that the Hong Kong panda family adores traditional local delicacies, such as egg waffles, fish balls, and Hong Kong-style milk tea, and portraying them as polyglots fluent in Cantonese, Putonghua, and English.

Bryan Lan Chun-yin, who founded local digital marketing agency Hyphen Media, would like to see Ocean Park get a specialized online marketing agency to help craft a cohesive and strategic promotional plan.

The content is paramount, says Lan, adding that the theme park should include more interactive and emotionally engaging materials. People are drawn to watching pandas because the creatures offer emotional value and a sense of healing, and this aspect should be further explored. Besides photos and videos, publicity should also highlight the relationship between people and pandas, as human-animal stories are always touching, he says.

Perhaps Hong Kong can copy Everland's YouTube channel in which videos of caretaker Kang Cheol-won tending to Fu Bao have enraptured audiences and led to the panda being affectionately dubbed "Grandpa Kang". In the same vein, Ocean Park could showcase more of the interactions between its giant-panda keeper Leung Ka-lun, known as the "nanny of pandas", and the animals.

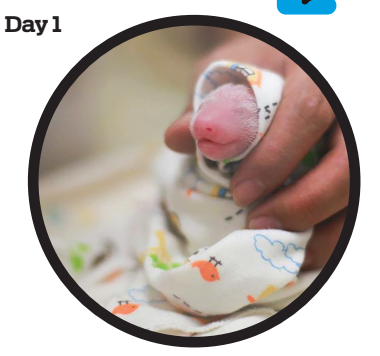
Lan says Ocean Park could consider teaming up with international celebrities in organizing activities with pandas to get more public attention and media buzz.

He is also optimistic about the potential of Hong Kong's panda-promotion campaign, citing substantial engagement metrics, such as followers, comments, and interactions on Ocean Park's official panda account.

It would be up to the park to catch up and think carefully about how to tell a good panda story, Lan said.

Sailou (younger brother)

Day 1



Day 3



Day 11



Day 22



Day 30



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