

Win-win strategy

Foreign, domestic firms find ways to shine amid new market realities

BUSINESS, PAGE 8



China, Thailand sign agreement on visa exemption

WORLD, PAGE 5



Tales set in stone

Carvings in cliffs and boulders tell the stories of nomadic culture

LIFE, PAGE 15

CHINA DAILY

GLOBAL EDITION 中国日报 MONDAY, JANUARY 29, 2024

Fighting hunger



Displaced Palestinians wait to collect free food on Saturday in Rafah, southern Gaza. Meanwhile, 20 Palestinians were killed and 150 injured in Israeli air strikes in Gaza as they queued up to collect food aid, a spokesperson for Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry said on Saturday. The Israeli military said it was looking into the report. MOHAMMED TALATENE / AP See more, page 6

XI'S VISION

Celebrations highlight key role of relations

Prominent figures from all walks of life revisit legacy of 60 years of Sino-French cooperation

By ZHANG YUNBI zhangyunbi@chinadaily.com.cn

Maestro Xu Zhong, a leading Chinese orchestra conductor and president of Shanghai Opera House, traveled to Paris for piano studies at the age of 16 and began what he called "close contacts and engagement with France for a total of 18 years".

A keen advocate of bilateral cultural exchanges, Xu held the baton on Thursday at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, directing the opera *Romeo and Juliette* created by French composer Charles Gounod — the first of the Beijing-based events marking the China-France Year of Culture and Tourism.

He is a witness of how both governments value these events which also mark the 60th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations this year.

President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron delivered video speeches respectively to a reception held prior to the opera's debut on Thursday.

"It is my utmost honor to present what I have learned in France on the stage tonight, and it is part of my conviction to give a boost to the cultural exchanges of the two peoples," Xu said.

On Saturday, Xi and Macron exchanged congratulatory messages to celebrate the establishment of diplomatic ties on Jan 27, 1964. In their messages, both leaders highlighted the ties' great impact and significance for the world.

Xi said that "today's world is once again at a critical crossroads", and he emphasized the two countries' shared identity as "independent and self-reliant major countries and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council".

He called on both nations to "honor the original aspiration of estab-

lishing diplomatic relations" and "jointly chart the path for humanity's development that leads to peace, security, prosperity and progress".

Showing his care for the further growth and development of bilateral relations, Xi said he is willing to work with Macron to take the anniversary as an opportunity to make the China-France comprehensive strategic partnership "even stronger and more dynamic", and to make greater contributions to the well-being of the people of the two countries and the world.

In his message, Macron said the world faces unprecedented crises, and it is more important than ever for France and China — as well as for Europe and China — to work together to find common solutions to global challenges.

He said that bilateral relations were "comprehensively revitalized" last year and added that France-China cooperation will go even further this year.

Paris looks to advance bilateral exchanges and cooperation in fields such as the economy, trade, culture and youth, and to strengthen communication and coordination on global issues, he said.

Xi noted that the establishment of diplomatic relations 60 years ago "is still highly relevant today".

The two countries have always honored independence and self-reliance, achieved common development and mutual learning, and played an important role in "promoting the world's multipolarity and democratizing international relations", he added.

Located in the heart of Beijing and known for its shape like a pebble, the National Centre for the Performing Arts is a landmark tourist attraction and another witness of China-France cooperation, as it was designed by the French architect Paul Andreu, who passed away in 2018.

See **Ties**, page 5



Chen Jianghong, a French artist of Chinese descent, who designed a pair of stamps to celebrate the upcoming Chinese Lunar New Year, the Year of the Dragon, displays his creation in Paris on Friday, after the stamps were unveiled by France's La Poste Groupe. GAO JING / XINHUA

Experts optimistic about growth target

By OUYANG SHIJIA and ZHOU LANXU

China's economy is showing signs of a steady rebound amid a series of stimulus measures, with profits of the country's industrial enterprises extending gains for a fifth consecutive month in December as overall manufacturing improved.

Experts said the latest figures send positive signals for a promising economic outlook in 2024, with economic growth of around 5 percent anticipated for this year, given robust policy support, the advancement of industrial transformation and upgrading and the deepening of reform and opening-up.

Manufacturing and infrastructure investment will play a bigger role in fostering stable economic growth in 2024, and more stimulus measures are needed to boost domestic demand and promote the upgrading and digital transformation of the manufacturing sector, they said.

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed on Saturday that industrial enterprises with annual revenue of at least 20 million yuan (\$2.8 million) saw their total profits increase on average 16.8 percent year-on-year in December, after a 29.5 percent rise in November.

In 2023, profits of industrial enterprises fell 2.3 percent year-on-year to 7.69 trillion yuan, narrowing from the 4.4 percent drop in the first 11 months, the bureau said.

The data points to a continued recovery trend in industrial profits, said NBS statistician Yu Wein-

ing, adding that more efforts should be made to consolidate the recovery trend and promotion of the high-quality development of industry.

Notably, profits at equipment manufacturing enterprises rose by 4.1 percent last year, up from the 2.8 percent rise in the first 11 months, NBS data showed.

Li Chao, chief economist at Zhesang Securities, said: "The equipment manufacturing sector has benefited from the country's deepening advancement of high-end, intelligent and green manufacturing. And it has played a bigger role in promoting the overall improvement of industrial profits."

Looking ahead, Li said he expects industrial profits to register positive growth this year with improved profitability, strong policy support and producer prices gradually returning to positive territory.

Zhao Bo, a tenured associate professor of economics at Peking University's National School of Development, said the latest economic indicators point to a continued economic recovery.

He estimated that China's economy will likely expand by around 5 percent to 5.5 percent, given the diminishing impact of real estate investment.

Despite the better-than-expected 2023 industrial profits results, experts warned that the broader economy is still facing pressures from still-weak domestic demand.

Guo Kai, executive president of CF40 Institute, a research institute affiliated with the financial

think tank China Finance 40 Forum, said Chinese industrial enterprises' profits have contracted for two years in a row — which has rarely happened before — even amid the manufacturing sector's strong performance in production, sales and investment.

Guo attributed the pressures faced by manufacturers' profits to lukewarm consumer demand, which pushed manufacturers to reduce prices while they expanded production, and stressed the need to prioritize boosting domestic demand in policy setting.

A CF40 report unveiled on Saturday said that the Chinese economy still faces an acute challenge of insufficient demand, making it necessary for the government to take on debt of at least 11 trillion yuan this year and promote annual growth in social financing of at least 11 percent to bring inflation and economic growth to a more reasonable range.

Zhang Bin, a senior CF40 researcher and deputy director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of World Economics and Politics, said China's manufacturing upgrade is in solid shape on the back of an open, fully competitive market landscape.

Nevertheless, manufacturing investment may gradually slow, as the country has entered an economic restructuring phase in which total fixed-asset investment will outpace manufacturing investment, Zhang said.

Xu Xianchun, former deputy head of the NBS, said more efforts should be made this year to boost domestic demand and expand investment to keep economic growth within a reasonable range.

Contact the writers at ouyangshijia@chinadaily.com.cn

WORLD WATCH

By Shi Zhongjun

ASEAN and China reap the benefits of exchanges, cooperation

Cooperation between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and China, which together account for 26 percent of the global population and more than one-third of global economic growth, has tremendous potential and broad prospects. It is also of great significance for advancing common prosperity and modernization in Asia, and safeguarding regional peace and stability.

In September, leaders of ASEAN member nations and China announced in Jakarta that 2024 will be the ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchanges, in a spirit of building stronger connectivity, facilitating cross-border travel, promoting mutual learning among civilizations in the region, and enhancing the ASEAN-China comprehensive strategic partnership in the long run.

China and the member states of ASEAN have forged time-honored friendships. Trade and cultural exchanges between ASEAN and China flourished along the routes of the ancient Maritime Silk Road, which had a far-reaching influence on the economic growth and social progress of both sides.

Since China and ASEAN established dialogue relations in 1991, both sides have been engaged in friendly exchanges and win-win cooperation based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit and shared responsibility. As one of the three pillars buttressing ASEAN-China relations, people-to-people exchanges have been bearing rich fruit in such fields as education, culture, tourism, youth, sports and media, laying a solid foundation for the rapid development of ASEAN-China relations.

In 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 65 million people traveled between

See **Friendship**, page 3

INSIDE
WTO a bulwark for trade system
Global Views, page 13

www.chinadailyglobal.com
A member of
ANN
China Daily Global
All Rights Reserved

Newsstand prices:
US \$1 Canada C\$1
UK £1 EU 1€ Kenya 50
Kenya Shilling
Asia Pacific: Thailand 120
thb; Philippines 120 php; Myanmar 2000 kyat; Japan
210 yen; Dubai 10 dirham; Pakistan 300 rupee

FESTIVE CURTAIN POISED TO RISE ON SHOWS WITH A DIFFERENCE

Fresh ideas expected to attract audiences during Chinese New Year

By CHEN NAN chennan@chinadaily.com.cn

When he recalls childhood memories of Spring Festival, which marks the first day of the first lunar month, Qu Peng, 44, still feels excited. In addition to the delicious food made by his family and new clothes



his parents bought him, Qu enjoyed watching traditional Chinese operas performed by art troupes from Shaanxi, his home province, and the neighboring

provinces of Shanxi and Henan. Born and raised in a small village in Tongguan county, Shaanxi, Qu said, "First came the sounds of percussion instruments such as drums and cymbals, before two costumed performers wearing heavy makeup appeared on the stage."

"Once they started singing, dancing and practicing martial arts,

they were transformed into characters from ancient times, such as heroes fighting on the battlefield. They performed outdoors on very high stages, and I usually woke up early in the morning, hoping to squeeze my way to the front to get close to the performers."

See **Performances**, page 2

PAGE TWO

Performances: Traditional boundaries broken



Qu Peng, a Qinqiang Opera actor with Yisushe Theater in Xi'an

From page 1

Qu's parents worked with an art troupe from Tongguan that specialized in performing Qinqiang Opera. Compared with Jinju Opera from Shanxi and Yuju Opera from Henan, Qinqiang Opera has always been Qu's favorite.

Performed in the Shaanxi dialect, Qinqiang Opera is known for its intense rhythm and high-pitched singing. The first such work Qu learned to sing was the classic *Three Drops of Blood*, which premiered in 1919 and tells the story of a wrongful conviction.

"When the audience cheered and applauded the players, I wished I had been one of the performers," he said.

Now an actor with Yisushe Theater in Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi, Qu heads the performance team. For Spring Festival this year, he will stage more than 80 shows at the theater.

"Each day, from the first day of Lunar New Year until Lantern Festival (which marks the end of the Lunar New Year), we will perform in Xi'an and villages in Shaanxi, Shanxi and Henan. We put on about nine shows a day and our audiences usually gather in front of the stage on benches ahead of the shows," Qu said.

He added that the upcoming Spring Festival will be different from those in recent years, as people's lives have returned to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We expect to see more people coming to our shows," Qu said, adding that clas-

sic and contemporary Qinqiang Opera performances will be staged.

In 1912, Yisushe Theater was founded by two playwrights from Shaanxi — Li Tongxuan (1860-1932) and Sun Renyu (1872-1934) — who were inspired by the 1911 Xinhai Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen, which ended the rule of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

Unlike other troupes, most of which were founded by folk artists to make a living and entertain the public, Yisushe was established in the hope of making a difference during the war by educating those who were too poor to go to school. The troupe also ran a school to train young performers in Qinqiang Opera.

Yisushe, one of the oldest art troupes in China, has preserved some 880 original scripts in 1,000 volumes that address social issues and embody values such as honesty, bravery, loyalty and justice.

"The theater is old, but our actors and actresses are very young," Qu said, adding that the theater has some 60 performers with an average age of 35. "More important, more and more young people are coming to our shows, thanks to the tourism boom in Xi'an," he said.

Emotional touch

Ji Fuji, 82, former director of Yisushe Theater, said that as Spring Festival is about family reunions and returning home, people in Shaanxi who move away to work in different parts of the country consider Qinqiang Opera as a way of staying in emotional touch with home.

In 2021, a street in the Drum Tower area, or Gulou area, of downtown Xi'an was turned into a cultural hub for Yisushe Theater to celebrate Qinqiang Opera. The area was renamed Yisu Theater Cultural District, and its theaters, restaurants and museums, which include The Museum of Yisushe, are popular with locals and tourists.

Ji, who first performed as a Qinqiang Opera actor when he was 9 and was director of Yisushe Theater from 1985 to 2005, said: "Tourists usually visit Xi'an for its historical landmarks, including the Bell Tower, Drum Tower and the ancient city walls. Now, many people come to the Yisushe Theater Cultural District, a new tourist destination, to celebrate Lunar New Year."

Although he has retired, Ji still regularly trains the theater's young performers and writes scripts for new Qinqiang Opera pieces.

"Last year, I worked with the theater's young performers during the Spring Festival holiday. We had a hectic schedule and were away from our families, but we were happy and satisfied. It reminded me of my younger days as a Qinqiang Opera actor, when I expected to be at my

busiest during Spring Festival, traveling and performing each day," Ji said.

A report examining tourism consumption in China's performing arts market last year, which was released by the China Association of Performing Arts, said Xi'an, the capital for 13 dynasties in Chinese history, was among the nation's most popular tour destinations in 2023. Revenue from the city's performing arts market exceeded the level in 2019, before the onset of the pandemic.

Nearly 10,000 live performances were staged nationwide during Spring Festival last year, a rise of about 22.5 percent compared with the same period in 2019. Total ticket revenue from such performances during the 2023 Spring Festival holiday was about 378 million yuan (\$52.54 million) — about 80 percent of the level in 2019.

With the performing arts market in China experiencing a robust recovery last year, more people are expected to visit theaters during Spring Festival this year.

The report also said that with the performing arts market booming in 2023, theatrical production companies have introduced new works to bring fresh ideas to Chinese theaters, in particular to appeal to young audiences. Performances staged in nontraditional spaces have become a new trend, the report added.

Director Zhang Xiao said: "Picture a theater without walls and a stage without curtains. Audiences are part of shows and performers move shows forward by constantly interacting with audiences. Nontraditional theater pushes the boundaries of traditional theater and offers a unique, exciting experience for performers and audiences."

Zhang's work, *Miss Julie*, a Chinese stage adaptation of August Strindberg's renowned eponymous play, which was published in 1888 and first performed in 1889, has witnessed 36 sold-out shows since it premiered on Nov 17.

The first nontraditional theatrical production by Star Theaters, which is

home to five small auditoriums, *Miss Julie* attracts theatergoers by removing traditional spatial boundaries between performers and the audience.

Zhang, 31, who graduated from the Central Academy of Drama, said that when he was approached by Star Theaters to create a show for nontraditional theater, he was intrigued by the idea and decided to adapt *Miss Julie*, which he read for the first time as a university student.

The production has just three roles: Julie, the Count, who is Julie's father; and Jean, an attractive and educated valet who works for the Count.

The auditorium, which usually seats 200, has been turned into a basement kitchen at Julie's home, with only 60 seats available in different parts of the set.

"Since my student days, I have enjoyed the idea of presenting theatrical productions in spaces other than traditional theaters. It's like a game that I design for audiences," said Zhang, who has created productions in a narrow *hutong*, or alleyway, in downtown Beijing, and also in a coffee shop and a swimming pool.

Key reason

Deng Wei, vice-president of Star Theaters, who is also the company's chief producer, said Zhang's knowledge and passion for nontraditional theater was the key reason Star Theaters invited him to stage *Miss Julie*.

"The pandemic seems to have changed the way in which people want to enjoy theaters. I have found that audiences are tending to look for new theater experiences after the hard times during the pandemic, when there were no live performances," Deng said.

"The government has also drawn up plans for developing nontraditional theater, and Star Theaters is included in these plans."

Deng added that a survey the company conducted for *Miss Julie* found that audiences for the production were mainly in the 18-30 age group, much younger than the creative team expected. Before each show, the team plans games for audiences to prepare them for the production.

"Some audience members even dress up as the characters from *Miss Julie*," Deng said.

"Coming to a show is no longer just about watching the performers onstage. It is an opportunity to communicate, meet people, and experience something traditional theaters cannot offer."

A total of 175 performances of *Miss Julie* are scheduled for this year, including during the Spring Festival holiday.

To appeal to tourists in Beijing, Star Theaters is working on a new production, combining stage performances with live action role-playing games.



Zhang Yuanyuan, an actress from Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre

Zheng Yi Temple Theater, located near the Qianmen commercial area in the Chinese capital, is also a popular destination for theater lovers.

The venue, which boasts a history of about 350 years, is the nation's oldest theater built from wood. Since it reopened in April 2022, it has gained a large fan base by staging a diverse range of shows, from traditional Chinese operas to classical music recitals.

For Spring Festival this year, it will present a series of shows catering to tourists and local residents.

Zhang Peng, general manager of the theater, said the two-story building only has about 130 seats, giving audiences the sense of being fully immersed in shows.

Zheng Yi Temple Theater is one of the few that remain in commercial guild halls in Beijing, Zhang said. Since it reopened, it has attracted numerous audiences, including those who watch shows streamed online.

Since 2022, the theater has been operated by Northern Kunqu Opera Theater, the only professional company in northern China dedicated to Kunqu Opera, which is performed in the melodic Suzhou dialect.

The company has exclusively choreographed Kunqu Opera works for the theater to showcase an art form that is about 600 years old and combines singing, dancing and acting.

In 2008, Kunqu Opera was inscribed on the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Zhang Peng said: "When audiences watch shows in the theater, they enjoy the beauty of traditional Chinese genres such as Kunqu Opera and Peking Opera. They also go back in time, as many Chinese artists, including Peking Opera masters Mei Lanfang and Tan Xinpei, once performed at the theater."



Top: An actress from Yisushe Theater. Above: The Yisushe Theater Cultural District in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, attracts visitors by staging Qinqiang Opera shows each day. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

TOP NEWS

Auschwitz revisited

Holocaust survivors and relatives arrive at the Auschwitz death camp in Oswiecim, Poland, on Saturday. About 20 survivors from various camps set up by Nazi Germany around Europe attended events marking the 79th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp by Soviet troops on Jan 27, 1945.

JAKUB PORZYCKI
VIA GETTY IMAGES



Foreign diplomats hail province's burgeoning ice-and-snow economy

By HOU CHENCHEN
in Mudanjiang, Heilongjiang
houchench@chinadaily.com.cn

Diplomats and other foreign dignitaries visited Northeast China's Heilongjiang province last week to seek more cooperation projects and share their experiences in related fields, with green opportunities in the winter sports and tourism industry being a focus of their attention.

The visitors, from countries with a strong winter sports culture and member states of the Olympic Council of Asia, also aimed to forge cooperation in the ice-and-snow industry.

For Peter Lizak, Slovakia's ambassador to China, providing suitable heating in the snow-covered area was an impressive achievement witnessed during a trip to Xuexiang National Forest Park in Mudanjiang.

"The air is clear, and I did not smell any coal burning here," Lizak said.

The province, known for its rich coal resources, is also a popular

winter tourist destination, with its snow and ice attractions.

Lizak was one of the 22 guests from 18 countries and international organizations who arrived in Mudanjiang on Tuesday as part of a five-day tour, organized by the Foreign Ministry, to gain firsthand insights into the 2025 Asian Winter Games set to be held in Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang.

The visiting diplomats expressed their keen interest in Heilongjiang's sustainable development in the emerging sector, which attracted many of the 6.62 million tourist visits to the province during the recent three-day New Year's holiday.

"We have to invest in sustainable means of transportation, sustainable ways of managing hotels and sustainable ways of managing infrastructure," Juerg Burri, the Swiss ambassador to China, said at a seminar on the ninth Asian Winter Games and the high-quality development of the ice-and-snow economy.

Burri said it is necessary to develop great infrastructure to develop the winter economy without harming the landscape.

Lizak said: "It is a complicated thing to balance tourism development and environmental protection. In Slovakia, we have restrictions on developing ski resorts in important nature reserves."

The local government has actively worked to protect ice and snow resources and boost the winter tourism economy, said Zhao Wenzheng, an official at Mudanjiang's foreign affairs office.

Zhao highlighted the use of green technology, such as the use of a geothermal heat pump system in local factories.

Traffic restrictions in the snow-covered region and the use of electric cars in freezing temperatures were also topics of interest among the visitors. Private gasoline-powered cars are restricted in snowy areas, and only electric cars and public transportation are permitted in the mountainous tourist spots.

"Electric cars and their batteries in China have developed rapidly, and they can now run smoothly in such winter climates," Zhao said.

Andreas Riecken, the Austrian ambassador to China, said that finding adequate energy for heating in freezing winters remains a challenge for snowy and icy countries.

"The water is frozen and the weather is not sunny, so solar power and hydro power are not reliable," he said.

Austria aims for carbon neutrality by 2040, and China before 2060. The two countries can cooperate more in green energy to achieve these goals, Riecken said.

Milia Jabbour, the Lebanese ambassador to China, said that it was the first time she had visited Heilongjiang and that she found the two countries can certainly share their experiences in the snow tourism industry.

"During this trip, I find we can learn from each other," Jabbour said. "As a new resort, Heilongjiang can learn more from Lebanon and other countries to cultivate culture and identity around snow, to attract tourists to come back again, while Lebanon can learn from Heilongjiang how to develop infrastructure and respect the ecosystem."

During the trip, the bus transporting the guests also took them to a frozen lake, giving them the opportunity to witness how local residents celebrate the winter fishing season.

China, US hold substantive, candid talks

Wang says 'Taiwan independence' presents challenge to ties between Beijing, Washington

By ZHANG YUNBI
zhangyunbi@chinadaily.com.cn

In the latest dialogue between senior officials of the two sides, Beijing has called on Washington to "support China's peaceful reunification", and the two sides made detailed plans and paved the way for official contacts and collaboration.

Observers said the improving relations between the world's top two economies need to continue their momentum of warming, and many other countries have made it clear that they do not want tension regarding the Taiwan Strait, or to have to choose sides between the United States and China on a wide range of topics.

Inside

Editorial,
page 11

The latest dialogue occurred when Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC Central Committee, held talks with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Friday and Saturday in Bangkok, Thailand.

"The two sides had candid, substantive and fruitful strategic communication on rolling out the consensus of the San Francisco meeting of the two heads of state and on the proper handling of important, sensitive issues in China-US relations," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement after the dialogue.

The White House said "the two sides held candid, substantive and constructive discussions on global and regional issues" in a statement released on Saturday.

So far, Wang and Sullivan have held four rounds of one-on-one talks over the course of the past nine months: in Vienna, Austria, in May; in Malta in September; in Washington in October; and in Bangkok.

During the Bangkok talks, Wang defined "Taiwan independence" as "the biggest risk to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" and "the biggest

challenge to China-US relations".

He emphasized that the recent elections in the Taiwan region "cannot change the basic fact that Taiwan is a part of China".

Washington should abide by the one-China principle and the three landmark China-US joint communiqués, put into action its commitment to not supporting "Taiwan independence", and "support China's peaceful reunification", he said.

Calling "Taiwan independence" the biggest challenge to the ties was a way of "urging Washington to keep a clear eye and a cool head", said Su Xiaohui, deputy director of the Department of American Studies at the China Institute of International Studies.

"The US recently continued sending ships to the Taiwan Strait and has also advanced arm sales to the island. Apparently, it has not given up its approach of playing 'the Taiwan card'," she said.

In Bangkok, China made its position clear by warning the US not to make further dangerous tests of its bottom line, she said. "This not only matters to China's national interests, but also to the stability of the relations."

Prior to the Bangkok talks, Thai Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Kanchara Patarachok said Thailand was confident that the dialogue between the two nations would contribute to peace and security in the region and on the global stage.

China and the US confirmed during the Bangkok meeting that the two heads of state will "maintain regular contact and provide strategic navigation for the bilateral relations", the Chinese Foreign Ministry said.

In terms of future official cooperation, the two sides agreed to launch a working group on counternarcotics cooperation in the near future, and to hold the first meeting of the inter-governmental dialogue on artificial intelligence this spring.

Beijing and Washington agreed to advance bilateral contacts at all levels in various fields and to take steps to expand people-to-people exchanges.

Cats removed from zoo after monkey abuse claims

By YANG ZEKUN
yangzekun@chinadaily.com.cn

Two cats were safely relocated from the monkey mountain enclosure at Kunming Zoo in Southwest China's Yunnan province on Saturday night following public outrage sparked by videos showing the monkeys dragging and pulling the stray cats.

After the two cats were removed from the enclosure, the zoo commissioned an animal hospital attached to the Yunnan Agricultural University to conduct a comprehensive examination. It confirmed that the two cats were in good health and had no external injuries.

The China Small Animal Protection

Association, which sent staff members to help relocate the cats on Saturday, said on Sunday afternoon that the two cats had arrived in Beijing. They will be cared for and rehabilitated at the association's facility, it said.

Video clips showing the monkeys at the enclosure dragging and hitting the cats went viral recently. Thousands of netizens questioned whether the zoo was mistreating the cats, and urged the authorities to ensure the cats were treated well and protected.

On Jan 18, the zoo said stray cats were introduced in the enclosure in 2013 as a rodent control measure. The cats did a good job of keeping rodents away.

The zoo said the cats and mon-

keys had coexisted peacefully for many years without any instance of mutual harm, and some cats had even reproduced in the enclosure. It said the issues raised by netizens involved playful interactions between the animals, and there was no evidence of abusive behavior.

Despite the explanation, netizens posted video clips again on Thursday questioning the zoo for housing monkeys and cats together, claiming the monkeys were pulling the cats' whiskers and tails.

Another video clip posted online on Friday showed visitors thwarting a woman's attempt to jump into the enclosure to rescue the cats. In a video posted later, the woman

said she never intended to jump into the enclosure and only wanted to draw attention to the plight of the cats.

A netizen who has been following developments said: "Rescuing two cats may not change the world, but it can change their lives. It is recommended to regularly send inspectors to check the management conditions of zoos across the country to prevent similar incidents."

On Sunday morning, Kunming Zoo posted a statement on its micro-blog account which said, "We will carefully reflect on and improve the shortcomings and gaps in our work, and promptly incorporate opinions and suggestions from the public."

Friendship: Growth of strategic partnership enjoying momentum

From page 1

China and the ASEAN countries, with nearly 4,500 connecting flights every week. Till the end of 2019, the aggregate number of students exchanged between the two sides exceeded 200,000.

Out of the top 10 popular destinations for Chinese tourists in recent years, seven are ASEAN states: Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia and the Philippines. After braving the pandemic with concerted efforts, ASEAN and China are now joining hands to promote the recovery of economic ties and people-to-people exchanges.

For three years in a row, China and ASEAN have remained each other's largest trading partner and each other's major tourist destination and source market. China has launched reciprocal visa-related policies with some ASEAN countries. Not long ago, Thailand and

China announced permanent visa exemptions for each other's citizens starting on March 1. Singapore and Malaysia also announced that they were granting 30-day visa exemptions for Chinese citizens.

These favorable arrangements have already witnessed increasing numbers of tourists traveling between ASEAN countries and China.

Looking ahead, ASEAN-China relations are standing at a new starting point, and the growth of their comprehensive strategic partnership is enjoying sound momentum. The ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchanges will definitely garner much stronger public support for this dynamic and productive partnership.

First, mutual understanding and friendship between the people of the two sides will be enhanced. Amity between peoples holds the key to relations among nations. People-to-people connectivity

ASEAN and China should further strengthen cultural and people-to-people exchanges, enhance political mutual trust, and expand practical cooperation to inject more positive energy into regional peace, stability and development.

stands out as the most essential, solid and lasting connectivity. Through colorful and meaningful events in such areas as tourism, education, culture and sports, people from ASEAN nations and China can gain a better understanding of

and learn from each other, thus rendering stronger support for the building of an ASEAN-China community with a shared future.

Second, mutual learning among civilizations will be strengthened. Both ASEAN and China boast unique and diverse cultures that are shining gems of Asian civilization. As the future of all countries is closely connected, the mutual learning among different civilizations plays an irreplaceable role in advancing humanity's modernization. Robust cultural and people-to-people exchanges between the ASEAN members and China will make the garden of Asian civilizations bloom more colorfully and vibrantly.

Third, the foundation for practical cooperation between ASEAN and China will be cemented. Since the establishment of dialogue relations between ASEAN and China, the practical cooperation in various areas between the two sides has registered

tremendous progress. Against the backdrop of complex changes in the international landscape, ASEAN and China should further strengthen cultural and people-to-people exchanges, enhance political mutual trust, and expand practical cooperation to inject more positive energy into regional peace, stability and development.

Throughout 2024, ASEAN and Chinese government departments, friendship organizations, business communities and other entities will carry out exchanges and cooperation in such areas as youth, education, culture, tourism, media, and science and technology. For example, as the only intergovernmental organization co-founded by the 10 member states of ASEAN and China, the ASEAN-China Centre has established itself as an efficient platform and bridge between ASEAN and China since its establishment.

The center's efforts will manage to greatly enhance public aware-

ness of ASEAN-China relations and promote mutual understanding among people of both sides. The events in 2024 will bring ASEAN-China people-to-people exchanges to new heights and enhance mutual understanding, thus contributing to the sound and sustained development of the ASEAN-China comprehensive strategic partnership.

In the face of a more unstable and uncertain world, ASEAN and China have, are and will always be advocating the spirit of independence, championing peaceful development, and promoting global stability and prosperity. Let us join hands to champion our Asian values of solidarity and collaboration, inject positive energy into an evolving region, move forward with firm and steady steps, and strive together for an even closer ASEAN-China community with a shared future, bringing more tangible benefits to our peoples.

The author is secretary-general of the ASEAN-China Centre. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



Wang Yi, director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, meets with United States National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Bangkok, Thailand, on Friday. WANG TENG / XINHUA

CHINA

The buzz around artificial intelligence, Chat GPT and large-scale AI models saw the phrases gain recognition from dictionaries, magazines and publishers around the world last year.

In China, Chat GPT was chosen as the International Word of the Year by Commercial Press, the country's oldest publishing agency, and Yao Wen Jiao Zi, a Shanghai literary magazine, included large-scale AI model in its top 10 popular phrases for 2023.

A large-scale AI model is a machine learning system with billions of parameters and computational resources that can handle massive amounts of data and accomplish complex tasks such as natural language processing and image recognition.

But at the most fundamental level, the high-tech wizardry depends on people feeding information into the system, and that has helped change the lives of some women living in a remote county in northwestern China's Gansu province.

Two years ago, Zhang Juan left Lanzhou, the provincial capital, to return to Jishishan Bonan, Dongxiang and Salar autonomous county, where she grew up, to begin working as an AI trainer at its Aidol Plan Digital Industrial Park. An AI trainer is a person who specializes in data annotation and the training of AI systems — the most fundamental part of the vast AI industry.

The county, in Linxia Hui autonomous prefecture in the southwestern part of Gansu, was struck by a 6.2 magnitude earthquake in December that killed more than 100 people and injured many more. Coverage of the rescue and recovery efforts touched the hearts of people across the country.

It was the first time many of them had heard of Jishishan, which has no train station or airport and is a three-hour drive from Lanzhou.

The industrial park sustained little damage during the earthquake and has now resumed operations.

Zhang never expected to develop a close connection with AI, or that it would change her family's life for the better.

In 2019, Ant Foundation, the Ant Public Welfare Foundation, and the China Women's Development Foundation jointly launched the Aidol Plan to support the employment of women in underdeveloped parts of central and western China.

Wang Zhumei, an Ant Foundation staff member, said the project has established about 20 digital employment centers in places including Jishishan, Qingjian in Shaanxi province, Tongren in Guizhou province, and Shuozhou in Shanxi province.

Remote county taps into AI buzz

Working as trainers for artificial intelligence systems gives women financial independence. **Yan Dongjie** and **Ma Jingna** report from Linxia, Gansu.



Zhang Juan (center) and other AI trainers from Jishishan Bonan, Dongxiang and Salar autonomous county in Gansu province take part in the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai last year. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

She said the Aidol Plan has helped more than 4,000 people find local employment, and some of its employment centers have become the largest employers in their areas. Thousands of women have been able to step out of their households and achieve economic independence through the initiative.

An important part of Zhang's AI job is document recognition.

"When the system misidentifies a handwritten signature while recognizing files uploaded by users, I need to highlight the incorrect signature and key in the corresponding correct characters," she said. "Through repeated iterations, possi-

bly thousands or tens of thousands of times, the system's ability to recognize various styles of handwritten Chinese characters will become stronger."

Zhang said the principles were similar when dealing with text, images or videos.

Her father died when she was in school, and Zhang and her three younger siblings depended on their mother's monthly income of 2,000 to 3,000 yuan as a migrant worker when they were growing up.

In 2019, after graduating from university, Zhang became a surveyor in Lanzhou and the main pillar of support for her family.

"My first project was in Longnan, where I had to draw houses, cars and mountains from aerial images onto a flat map," she said. "Sometimes I had to take a bus for a long time, go to rural areas or mountains for field surveys, and stay overnight. My colleagues were all male, so it was quite challenging."

Like many engineering jobs, Zhang said being a surveyor was not a particularly welcoming occupation for a woman. One time, she was experiencing severe abdominal pain but could not let it hinder her fieldwork. She climbed a high mountain with several male col-

leagues and, despite being exhausted, persevered so that she would not slow them down.

"With a monthly salary of around 3,000 yuan (\$420), it was not enough to sustain myself considering the cost of renting a place and living expenses, let alone supporting my family," she said.

Another consideration that led to her decision to return to Jishishan was that her mother was growing older and it would be good to be closer to her.

"My mother is nearly 50 years old and illiterate," she said. "She hasn't had much education and could only do manual labor, such as picking

cotton for a cotton factory in Xinjiang or working as a waitress in a restaurant."

Now, as the main pillar of her family and living closer to it, Zhang said she feels "empowered and valuable". After paying rent and personal expenses in the county seat each month, she can still contribute around 2,000 yuan a month to her family in their home village.

She knows the repetitive and straightforward AI training work is similar to the early days of the industrial revolution, but when asked to describe her profession in a few words proudly says, "I am a teacher of AI."

"When I first heard about AI, I thought it was amazing and distant," Zhang said. "But after getting involved in data annotation work, I realized that AI can become smarter because we are teaching it. Our work is helping AI become more intelligent."

When Zhang and her close to 10 colleagues encounter something they do not know how to annotate, they discuss it and laugh together. During breaks, they chat, sing and play games. When they've been staring at the computer for too long, they exercise on the fitness equipment in the office's rest area.

Zhang said one project she worked on was related to a "tourist city". While doing data annotation, she saw pictures of tourist attractions, and read news from cities across the country such as Beijing, Chongqing and Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province.

She thought, "It's as if I'm a little closer to this world."

"I may never have the chance to visit these places in person, but through the AI annotation work, I feel like I have a small connection to the development of these cities and the people there," she said.

"When you go through short videos, have you noticed that the content the app sends you happens to be the type you like? If you enjoy watching cooking videos, it will show you more cooking videos. If you like watching beautiful women, it will recommend more of them to you. These apps are so clever because we taught them."

On weekends, Zhang goes home to help her mother with farm work and shares interesting stories from work with her family. She tells her siblings the future is "full of hope" and they should "just go for it".

Contact the writers at yandongjie@chinadaily.com.cn



Online See more by scanning the code



Left: Ma Lei (Left) works as an AI trainer in the Aidol Plan Digital Industrial Park in Jishishan in Gansu last year.



Middle: An e-commerce center built in the Aidol Plan Industrial Park serves as a workplace for AI trainers in Jishishan.



Right: Zhang Juan (right), an AI trainer, annotates data in the digital industrial park in Jishishan. PHOTOS BY YAN DONGJIE / CHINA DAILY

Mother of two makes most of high-tech opportunity

By **YAN DONGJIE** in Linxia, Gansu

A job advertisement offering free training for "autonomous driving annotation" and "flexible working hours" encouraged Ma Lei to return to the workforce in Gansu province's Jishishan Bonan, Dongxiang and Salar autonomous county three years ago.

Now, in the wake of the 6.2 magnitude earthquake that struck the area last month, the director of the county's Aidol Plan Digital Industrial Park, Tian Xiao, is busy trying to recruit more than 50 data annotation workers in Jishishan to help people in the area support themselves.

The mother of two boys, Ma previously quit working to take care of her children and family, a common choice for many women in China's rural counties and towns.

"We still hold traditional views, believing that women should take more responsibility for the family,"

she said. "Both husband and wife cannot be busy at the same time. Who will take care of the family? I took care of my two children till kindergarten by myself. After each kid was born, I would quit my job and focus on taking care of them."

However, she longed for work. Before joining the digital industry park, she was a nurse.

"But nursing requires night shifts, and the timing isn't always desirable," she said. "Sometimes, when the children finished school and looked for their mother, I wasn't at home, and I knew they would be sad. Sometimes, after finishing a night shift, I was too tired to handle breakfast. So, after two years, it was difficult to continue."

Many of Ma's friends resigned and became housewives, a common occurrence in the county, which is home to many people who are members of three of China's smaller ethnic groups. Most mar-

ried early, like Ma, a member of the Dongxiang ethnic group who is in her early 30s. Her eldest son is already in junior high school.

The most appealing thing about being a data annotation specialist for Ma is that it frees her from having to follow a strict timetable.

Her main job is to review the information identified by artificial intelligence, correct any misidentified information, and supplement missing information, which helps improve the accuracy of AI.

Yan Peng, a software development engineer in Beijing, said: "For example, the AI system for autonomous driving is already quite mature, but its accuracy still needs to be improved through training by AI trainers. Sometimes, the system may not accurately recognize a pedestrian with an unusual posture, but through repeated annotation, the recognition ability can be enhanced."

On average, Ma needs to work more than six hours a day, six days a week, but she can choose her own times, allowing her to have dinner with her children after work and help them with their homework.

In her first month as a data annotator, Ma made just 4.5 yuan, but she's now earning about 4,000 yuan (\$560) a month, 50 percent more than when she was a nurse.

"The first time I used these complex computer systems, I found it very difficult," she said. "I had to work hard to learn during training, but my efficiency was low during practice. So, the salary for the first few months was almost negligible. However, the trainers said that this work was related to AI."

"Although I didn't understand AI, I believed it had great prospects, so I wanted to persist and give it a try."

She's proud to be a mother with the ability to balance family care and a professional career.

"I asked my younger son what he wants to do in the future, and he said he wants to become an AI trainer like me," Ma said.

In the office next to Ma's, Wang Juan also speaks with pride about her work. She is an Alipay customer service representative and trains the customer service team.

"In the past, I thought that after graduating from university, I could only use what I learned by working in big cities," she said. "If I returned to my hometown, I would probably only be able to work in a supermarket or clothing store, or a restaurant."

Wang never expected she would be able to become a white-collar worker, working regular hours, enjoying daily activities such as drinking coffee in the office and exercising on sports equipment during her lunch break. She has trained over 400 people to lead similar lives.

Lu Penghui, Jishishan's deputy county head, said over 70 percent of the employees in the industrial park are women, with over half being members of smaller ethnic groups.

Lu serves as the liaison person for the National Healthcare Security Administration's targeted assistance to Jishishan to prevent the county from slipping back into poverty. During his two years in Jishishan, he has seen the number of people employed at the industrial park grow from a handful to over 300.

He said that large food delivery platforms like Ele.me require health certificate verification for their delivery personnel, well-known electric vehicle companies like Xiaopeng and Li Auto need autonomous driving annotation services, and Alipay provides cloud customer service.

Many such high-tech services in bigger Chinese cities have their roots in county seats like Jishishan, bringing employment opportunities to local people and changing their lives.



Online See more by scanning the code

WORLD

Russia marks 80 years since breaking Nazi siege of Leningrad

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia — The Russian city of St. Petersburg on Saturday marked the 80th anniversary of the end of a devastating World War II siege by Nazi forces with a series of memorial events attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Kremlin leader laid flowers at a monument to fallen Soviet defenders of the city, then called Leningrad, on the banks of the Neva River, and then at Piskarevskoye Cemetery, where hundreds of thousands of siege victims are buried.

On Saturday afternoon, Putin was joined by Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko in Gatchina, a town outside St. Petersburg that once housed camps for Soviet prisoners of war, for the unveiling of a statue commemorating civilians killed during the Nazi onslaught.

The Red Army broke the nearly two-and-a-half-year blockade on Jan. 19, 1943, after fierce fighting. Estimates of the death toll vary, but historians agree that more than 1 million Leningrad residents perished from hunger, or air and artillery bombardments, during the siege.

Putin was born and raised in Leningrad, and his World War II veteran father suffered wounds while fighting for the city.

"In a number of European countries, Russophobia is promoted as state policy," Putin said on Saturday.

In his speech, Putin also lambasted the Baltic States over human rights, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — ruled from Moscow during the Cold War but now members of the European Union

and NATO military alliance — have been among the strongest critics of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

Blockade survivor Irina Zimneva, 85, told The Associated Press that she is still haunted by memories of the tiny food rations distributed to residents during the deadly winter of 1941-42. Each of her family members received 125 grams of bread a day, and Zimneva's mother pleaded with her to be patient as she begged for more.

Dark days

Zimneva said her mother's love helped her through those dark days.

"I don't know what other way (I would have survived)," she said.

When Nazi soldiers encircled Leningrad on Sept. 8, 1941, Zimneva had more than 40 relatives in the city, she said. Only 13 of them lived to see the breaking of the siege.

Before the anniversary commemorations, an open-air exhibition was set up in central St. Petersburg to remind residents of some of the most harrowing moments in the city's history.

For older residents, these are poignant reminders of a time when normal life had been suspended, with heavy bombardment largely destroying the city's public transit network, while death and disease spread through its streets.

World War II, in which the Soviet Union lost an estimated 27 million people, is a linchpin of Russia's national identity.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Ties: Events seen as 'epitome' of cooperation

From page 1

Bertrand Lortholary, the French ambassador to China, hailed the building as "majestic," saying that Thursday's reception and the debut of the opera were "an epitome of our collaboration and arrangements with symbolic significance."

"Let us pay tribute to the men and women of China and France who have worked relentlessly over the past six decades to build strong bonds between our two countries in good times or difficult times," he said at the reception.

Mutually beneficial economic and trade cooperation "is a powerful engine of China-France relations," said Chinese Ambassador to France Lu Shaye.

"The two countries' traditional cooperation projects such as aerospace, civil nuclear energy and high-speed rail are progressing smoothly, while cooperation in emerging areas such as the digital economy, renewable energy and organic agriculture and food have a promising future," he wrote in a recent article.

France had set up more than 6,000 companies in China by the end of 2021, and China has been the number one Asian country investing and creating jobs in France for three consecutive years.

Last year, bilateral trade reached \$78.936 billion.

Fabrice Fourcade, vice-president of French power supply giant Electricite de France and chairman of EDF China, voiced his great optimism over the relations' future as well as practical cooperation.

"I believe green energy, low-carbon energy — ranging from nuclear to renewable, offshore wind, photovoltaic technology — is very promising," he said.

Other promising areas include manufacturing and products from the agricultural, luxury and beauty sectors, he added.

Observers and officials noted that in addition to practical cooperation, in the political context the two sides have maintained great coordination on most regional hot spot issues and have expressed support for major international initiatives put forward by the other side.

"In particular, the two sides have carried out trendsetting cooperation on issues such as tackling climate change and preserving

In this dangerous world of ours, there must be powers of peace..."

Laurent Fabius, former French prime minister

biodiversity," Chinese Consul General in Marseille Dong Guangli told local media.

Zhang Ji, professor and deputy dean of Fudan University's School of International Relations and Public Affairs in Shanghai, said that to make their relations more resilient, the two countries should "shape a correct perception of one another and further tap their leading roles in international affairs."

"France needs to eliminate prejudices on ideology and China's political system, and be more inclusive toward China's development and the Chinese path to modernization. As for China, it should better understand and honor France's leading role in the EU, its influence among many developing countries and its positive role in advancing multilateralism and cultural diversity," he said.

Also, the two countries should further lead the sound and stable growth of China-EU relations, as Paris' role in advancing China-EU ties is rising, he said.

"By joining hands, China and France could and should help avert bloc-based confrontation, new divisions in the world and another Cold War," he said.

Laurent Fabius, former French prime minister and now president of the Constitutional Council, said, "It was extremely audacious and positive, in 1964, for General de Gaulle's France to be the first major Western country to recognize China."

Both countries are very attached to independence and are committed to multilateralism and peace, he told Xinhua News Agency. "We do not want a bloc policy, with the risks of conflicts that this entails."

"In this dangerous world of ours, there must be powers of peace and sustainable development, and this must obviously be ... a major mission of China and France," he added.



Chinese tourists in traditional Thai dress pose for a photograph at Wat Arun in Bangkok, Thailand, on Wednesday. BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

China, Thailand sign visa exemption pact

People-to-people exchanges between nations expected to get boost from policy

By YANG WANLI in Bangkok
yangwanli@chinadaily.com.cn

China and Thailand signed an agreement on mutual visa exemption for holders of ordinary passports and passports for public affairs on Sunday. The policy, which will come into effect on March 1, is expected to boost people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.

The agreement was a major outcome during the first meeting of consultation mechanism between the ministers of foreign affairs of Thailand and China, which was held in Bangkok.

At a news conference in the Thai capital, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, said: "It's important that peoples from the two countries have forged closer friendships and stronger bonds, and are now embracing a better life."

There will be a big increase in the number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand, Wang said. "We also welcome friends from Thailand to feel the vitality and vibrancy of China and the hospitality of the Chinese people."

At the news conference, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara said the visa-free agreement is a symbol of long-lasting Sino-Thai friendship, trust and confidence, which is evidenced at every level.

"The meeting is a significant step in our cooperation, held at the level of foreign ministers of both countries, and we have agreed to alternately

It's important that peoples from the two countries have forged closer friendships and stronger bonds, and are now embracing a better life."

Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee

host at least once every year," he said. "I am certain that travel between our two peoples, whether for tourism or business, will become more convenient, and help to stimulate the tourism industry in both countries."

As next year will mark the 50th anniversary of China-Thailand diplomatic relations, Wang said China highly commends China-Thailand friendship and mutual trust. The bilateral relationship between the two countries has withstood the test of the changing international landscape and grown from strength to strength over the past half a century, he said.

"China always sees Thailand as a priority in its diplomacy with neighboring countries, and supports Thailand in following a development path that suits its national conditions," Wang stressed.

He also noted that China appreciates Thailand's firm commitment to

the one-China principle and its active support for the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative.

"China is ready to work with Thailand to jointly deepen the building of a more stable, prosperous and sustainable China-Thailand community with a shared future, and provide more stability and certainty to a changing and turbulent world," Wang said.

To strengthen the cooperation with China, Parnpree said Thailand is committed to promoting trade, investment, security and cooperation on culture and tourism, to facilitating connectivity, people-to-people relations, and to advancing cooperation at various multilateral and regional forums.

During the meeting on Sunday, both sides also agreed to speed up development of the China-Thailand Railway, fully implement the China-Laos-Thailand Connectivity Development Corridor Outlook, and open the central line of the Trans-Asian Railway as soon as possible.

The two countries signed agreements on the export of poultry meat and podocarpus plants to China. Podocarpus is a versatile, low-maintenance plant for landscaping.

China will import more specialty agricultural products from Thailand, support more Chinese companies in investing and growing in Thailand, and foster new drivers of cooperation in new energy vehicles, digital economy and green development.

During the meeting, the two ministers also exchanged views on current key regional and international situations, including the situation in Myanmar, the Korean Peninsula and the Middle East.

Seeds of win in freezing cold sown in blazing heat

BANGKOK — "It doesn't snow in Thailand, but you can carve it so well," Sudakan Jarkkaew, 18, a college student, said joyfully, recalling a moment when Chinese visitors came complimented her team's snow sculpture at a contest in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, this month.

Sudakan and her three classmates won first prize in the 16th international snow sculpture competition for college students, escaping the tropical heat of Bangkok and defying the freezing cold of Northeast China.

They were among 57 teams from countries and regions that took part in the annual event, hosted by Harbin Engineering University and Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival from Jan. 4 to 7.

The winning sculpture, "Tuk Tuk on Tour", featured an autorickshaw carrying various characters related to Thai culture and traditions, representing elements from various regions of the country on four sides of the snow art, Sudakan said.

Tight schedule

The team was running a tight schedule with only three weeks to prepare for the competition under the guidance of Sorachai Chanasuk, 27, their coach and teacher at Saowabha Vocational College.

Sorachai, leading students on the international stage for the first time, said the weather was a challenge.

"We didn't wear thick clothes and gloves when we practiced in Thailand, but we had to wear them when we competed in Harbin. This made it difficult to use our tools effectively."

Despite never having done snow carving before, the team beat the odds by practicing with clay, cement and ice cubes.

"We didn't expect to win, but we wanted to give it our all so that we wouldn't regret it later," Sudakan said.

Taking part in the competition was an eye-opener, she said.

"We had the opportunity to meet and talk to people from China, and we enjoyed our conversations. The food was also very different from what we are used to in Thailand, and we were surprised to find that it was delicious."

Araya Chaichuwong, the college's deputy director, said taking part in the contest was driven by a desire to provide students with an inspiring experience. The cultural exchange was an investment in students' growth and a source of pride for Saowabha Vocational College and Thailand, he said.

XINHUA

Chinese automakers carve niche for themselves in Egypt

CAIRO — Chinese cars have a great future in Egypt, which now depends mainly on China, whether for cars or buses, said Khaled Geyushi, vice-chairman of Egypt's Geyushi Automotive Industry.

Geyushi said in a recent interview that "what distinguishes Chinese cars in Egypt is that their quality has greatly increased and their prices are reasonable."

The Egyptian auto businessman said his company has been working with several Chinese partners for seven years, including Yutong, Zhongtong and others, assembling their buses in Egypt.

"The quality of Chinese cars is high, and their agents and service centers in the Egyptian market are strong," said Geyushi.

The market for Chinese cars has grown stronger in the Egyptian market through their partnership with renowned local agents such as Mansour Automotive Group for MG and Abou Ghaly Motors for Geely, he said.

"I see that the future of Chinese cars in Egypt is promising," the Egyptian businessman said.

Established in 1944, Geyushi has become one of Egypt's leading automotive companies, with an



New SUV models of Jetour Auto, a Chinese motor vehicle maker, are shown at their launch ceremony, at Giza Pyramids in Giza, Egypt, on Aug. 8. SUI XIANKAI / XINHUA

advanced manufacturing facility in Egypt that produces about 5,000 buses annually, including Chinese brands.

In light of the distinguished relations between Egypt and China, Geyushi recommended the establishment of an automobile industrial complex in Egypt to manufacture Chinese cars and

their components and export them.

"I believe that in the coming period, Chinese cars should be locally manufactured in Egypt," he said, explaining that the North African country has the necessary manpower and energy at low prices, as well as free trade agreements with European and African countries.

I see that the future of Chinese cars in Egypt is promising."

Khaled Geyushi, vice-chairman of Egypt's Geyushi Automotive Industry

Manufacturing Chinese vehicles in Egypt will help with technology localization and employment in Egypt, he said.

A report by the Automotive Marketing Information Council shows that China's Chery, MG and BYD were among the top ten car brands sold in Egypt in the first 10 months of 2023.

"I recommend that Chinese automobile companies in Egypt spend more on publicity, marketing and service centers to achieve further growth," Geyushi said.

"Generally, I believe that in the coming few years, Chinese cars will be much more popular in the Egyptian market," he said.

XINHUA

WORLD



Chinese ambassador to France Lu Shaye (third from right), among other Chinese and French officials, on Saturday pay tribute to late French president General Charles de Gaulle at his cemetery in Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises to mark the 60th anniversary of China-France diplomatic ties. LI YANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

De Gaulle role in Sino-French ties hailed

By CHEN WEIHUA

in Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, France
chenweihua@chinadaily.com.cn

As China and France marked the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two established, the man who was pivotal in making them happen was not forgotten.

On Saturday China's Ambassador to France Lu Shaye and two busloads of guests paid tribute to General Charles de Gaulle at Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, 250 kilometers east of Paris, where he is buried.

On Jan 27, 1964, China and France announced in a joint communique that they had established diplomatic ties, making France the first major Western country to do so at the height of the Cold War.

At a news conference four days later de Gaulle said: "The French Republic has decided to place its relations with the People's Republic of China on a normal, in other words diplomatic, level."

Lu was greeted by several local leaders and politicians including Pascal Babouot, mayor of Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, and Nicolas Lacroix, president of the Haute-Marne Department Council and president of the Charles de Gaulle Memorial.

He laid a wreath in the cemetery and another one at the giant Cross of Lorraine, which was used as a symbol of the Free France that de Gaulle led during World War II.

"Sixty years ago Chairman Mao

"I think he (Charles de Gaulle) would be amazed by the revolution of the country and by the depth of your people."

Nathalie de Gaulle, great-granddaughter of Charles de Gaulle

Zedong and General de Gaulle, with their excellent strategic vision, broke the ice of the Cold War and crossed the divide between different blocs to make a historic decision to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level," Lu said at the Anne de Gaulle Amphitheater of the Charles de Gaulle Memorial.

Using the Chinese idiom referring to one not forgetting where water comes from when one drinks it, Lu said the event at the Charles de Gaulle Memorial on the exact day 60 years later was of "special significance".

"Gaullism has a broad and profound connotation, but the most profound core is of independence," he said, adding that this is a value that China and France have in common.

Lacroix said, "The common his-

tory of our nations finds a natural echo here in Colombey."

A documentary titled *De Gaulle, A Visionary Giant Beyond Time* produced by CGTN of China was played in the amphitheater.

Among those at the event was Nathalie de Gaulle, great-granddaughter of the general.

She echoed Lu's view, saying that the legacy of her great-grandfather is of independence and freedom.

"He was a quite pragmatic man. He was a visionary person."

Thanks to Charles de Gaulle's building of a relationship between the two countries 60 years ago, French and Chinese live with his legacy today, she said.

"We see today's delegation; it's a lively friendship between our two nations and we have General de Gaulle to be thanked for that."

Nathalie de Gaulle, who visited China several months ago, said her great-grandfather, who died aged 79 in 1970, would be "immensely impressed" if he could visit China today. "I think he would be amazed by the revolution of the country and by the depth of your people," she told China Daily.

She was impressed by the architecture of Chinese cities and said there is nothing to be envied in European cities. Chinese have a vision for the future but also, in a country with thousands of years of history, remember their past, she said.

"That is the greatness of China today: remember your past and have a clear vision for your future."

Prospects bleak for resolving Gaza crisis

No sign of end to Israeli strikes despite worldwide push for two-state solution

By CHEN YINGQUN

chenyingqun@chinadaily.com.cn

Peace in the Middle East hinges on Israel halting its military operations in Gaza, and the two-state solution is the only feasible way to solve the Palestine-Israel conflict, analysts say. However, these goals are elusive for the time being, even as Israel confronts increasing internal and external pressures, they said.

Israel's military action in Gaza started in October after Hamas stormed into southern Israel, killing 1,200 people and taking 240 hostages, 132 of whom still being held in Gaza.

More than 100 days later the Israeli offensive has left swathes of Gaza in ruins, has led to about 1.9 million Palestinians being displaced and has killed more than 26,250 people, according to figures from Gaza.

The conflict has also caused chain reactions in the region. For example, the US has launched airstrikes on Houthi group targets in Yemen, in response to Houthi attacks on Israel-affiliated and bound ships in and around the Red Sea.

In November the United Nations Security Council called for the formulation of a "concrete" timetable and a road map toward a two-state solution that would result in a Palestinian state being set up.

China, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States have supported a two-state solution, but Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has strongly opposed the idea.

Sven Biscop, director of Europe in the World Programme at the

Emgmont-Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, said that the first step in keeping the Middle East region stable is for Israel to end its military operations, and the sooner the better.

"It could then lead to the next step: a big international conference to solve the Palestine-Israel conflict as a whole, but chances, alas, remain small."

Yu Guoqing, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of West Asia and African Studies in Beijing, said Israel has high goals for the military operation, including wiping out Hamas, which now appears to be an increasingly difficult task.

The conflict has also deepened the divide between Israel and the rest of the world as the country faces global criticism over the humanitarian crisis its offensive has created in Gaza. With more than 100 hostages still held by Hamas, the Israeli government is also under domestic pressure to obtain their release.

Prolonged conflict

"This prolonged conflict is a test for Israel and the Israeli government," Yu said. "Facing internal and external conflict, it must make some critical decisions."

Yuan Zheng, deputy director of the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, said Israel's ally the US is also in a quandary. Israel is its most important ally in the Middle East, and the Jewish community in the US wields significant influence over US policy in the region, so President Joe Biden's administration

will undoubtedly continue to support Israel.

However, the Biden administration opposes Israel being too rigid on certain issues, including refusing to go along with the two-state solution and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Yu said. "So the US will also maintain pressure on it."

The Biden administration is concerned that the Palestine-Israel conflict may escalate and that its ramifications will be felt elsewhere, which may strengthen global opposition to Israel's stance. It is also possible that terrorists will take more actions against the US, posing significant risks to the country, Yu said.

"Israel cannot possibly disregard the attitude of the US entirely. However, Israel will not easily compromise either, and it will be a long process before it does."

Yu said the continuation of the conflict may lead to an increasing hostility toward the United States and Israel in the Middle East. This also indicates that the US is not capable of resolving all Middle Eastern issues on its own.

"There is now a clear voice in the world that advocates a new multilateral effort for peace, leaving the US isolated."

The US does not have particularly good solutions for conflict-related issues either. For instance, its strikes on the Houthis have not stopped their attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea, Yu said, and last week the Houthis said they had made a direct hit on a US warship. "The US is experiencing a kind of comprehensive frustration in the Middle East, or it can be said that its influence on many regional issues is declining."

Agencies contributed to this story.

UN calls for aid agency funds to be resumed

GAZA/JERUSALEM — The secretary-general of the United Nations on Sunday called on countries to continue funding the main agency providing aid in Gaza after several of its employees were accused of taking part in the Hamas attack on Israel that ignited the conflict four months ago.

UN chief Antonio Guterres warned that the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, would be forced to scale back aid to more than 2 million Palestinians as soon as February. The coastal enclave is in the grip of a severe humanitarian crisis, with a quarter of the population facing starvation.

"The abhorrent alleged acts of these staff members must have consequences," Guterres said in a statement.

He said that of the 12 employees accused of taking part in the attack, nine had been immediately terminated, one was confirmed dead and "the identity of the two others is being clarified". He said all would be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution.

The UNRWA has 13,000 staffers in Gaza, nearly all of them Palestinians. It provides basic services, from medical care to education, for Palestinians.

More than 2 million of the territory's 2.3 million people depend on it for "sheer survival", including food and shelter, UNRWA director Philippe Lazzarini said, warning this lifeline can "collapse any time now". The United States suspended

funding over the weekend, followed by several other countries, including Britain, Germany and Italy.

The dispute over the UNRWA came as the International Court of Justice ruled on Friday that Israel must do its utmost to limit death and destruction in its Gaza offensive.

The top UN court has asked Israel for a compliance report in a month, placing added scrutiny on Israel's military. The court's binding ruling stopped short of ordering a ceasefire, but its orders were in part a rebuke of Israel's conduct in the conflict.

The case brought by South Africa to the UN court alleged Israel is committing genocide, which Israel vehemently denies. A final ruling is expected to take years.

Many countries welcomed the ruling but Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced it as "outrageous". Other countries such as Britain expressed reservations.

The court ordered Israel to urgently allow aid into Gaza. The amount of aid entering the territory remains well below the daily average of 500 trucks before the conflict, and UN agencies say distribution within Gaza has been severely hampered by the fighting and delays at Israeli checkpoints.

Cease-fire demand

Demonstrators in Europe, including in Germany and Italy, took to the streets on Saturday to demand a

cease-fire, the Turkish media Anadolu Agency reported.

Around 20,000 people marched in Madrid on Saturday in support of Palestinians.

Many of the marchers carried banners and placards denouncing the "genocide" in Gaza, which has been under relentless bombardment and siege.

"They have been without water, without food, without anything, for almost 110 days," a Madrid demonstrator, 54-year-old Lobna Elnakhala, said of the situation in Gaza.

"Children are dying and living in a very difficult situation."

Some banners called for sanctions to be levied against Israel.

The Israeli army on Sunday said its special forces were continuing to engage in "intensive battles" in Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis. Strikes were also carried out in central and northern Gaza, it added.

The World Health Organization and the medical charity MSF have issued urgent warnings about the largest health facility in Khan Younis, Nasser Hospital, saying the remaining staff could barely function with supplies running out and intense fighting nearby.

WHO footage showed people in the crowded facility being treated on blood-smeared floors as frantic loved ones shouted and jostled. Cats scavenged on a mound of medical waste.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Briefly

ARGENTINA

Infrastructure minister resignation confirmed

The Argentine government said on Saturday that Infrastructure Minister Guillermo Ferraro will resign in the coming days for "personal reasons". "Progress will be made in the original plan to merge the infrastructure area within the Ministry of Economy," the president's office said on social media platform X. It said such a merger "will generate greater coherence in the economic policy of the national government, and will allow for further adjustment of the budget to the current crisis context." Ferraro's resignation will be the first at the ministerial level since President Javier Milei took office on Dec 10. With the cabinet reshuffle, the Argentine government will soon have eight ministries instead of nine.

EUROPE

EU council chief drops bid for parliament seat

Charles Michel, president of the European Council, on Friday abandoned his plan to seek a seat in the European Parliament in the face of criticism that the move would undermine his current role at a crucial time. Michel's reversal came just a few weeks after he announced he would run in June's European Parliament election, a move that sparked criticism as it meant he would have to leave his post months before it officially ends on Nov 30. In a statement on Facebook, Michel, 48, a former Belgian prime minister, said he would now stay in his post as president of the European Council until the end of his term. Michel has been in his current post since 2019.

CAMBODIA

Elephant found dead with sharp force injury

A seven-month-old endangered Asian elephant was spotted dead in Cambodia's Mondulkiri province, with a sharp force injury in the lower part of its chest, said a Ministry of Environment's statement on Saturday. Rangers found the 200-kilogram elephant dead in a forest in Kaoh Nheak district on Friday, the statement said. "An autopsy was carried out, but authorities did not find a bullet in the mammal," the statement said, adding that a further probe is underway. Listed as endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, Asian elephants are some of the largest mammals on the planet.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Sixty good reasons to mark enduring bond

By CHEN YINGQUN
and LIU JIANQIAO

The enduring friendship between China and Tanzania is growing stronger, and collaboration between the two benefits both and has great potential, says Tanzania's Ambassador to China, Khamis Omar.

The 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Tanzania is being celebrated this year, and the friendship between the two continues to grow increasingly robust, Omar said.

"China and Tanzania have a lot in common. In the past both had a common kind of quest to fight against

colonialism and oppression and to lift people's human rights in a real sense. Now both sides share a common vision of advancing toward prosperity and have enjoyed a substantial and supportive relationship."

China supported Tanzania even when the former was relatively poor itself, he said. The most notable venture the two sides have been involved in is the 1,860-kilometer Tazara Railway, which links landlocked Zambia with the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam, and which opened in 1976.

"It was the first regional project that happened in our region in Africa, so it was really appreciated because at that time China itself did not have much

financial muscle," Omar said. "It was also a symbol of Chinese contribution to the liberation, freedom and independence of Africa."

China has played a substantial role in bolstering Tanzania's economy by supporting plantations and industrial facilities and by deploying technicians, which has been instrumental in initiating economic modernization. Moreover, since 1964 China has been sending medical teams to help Tanzania.

Over time China and Tanzania have expanded and strengthened their collaboration. Beyond aiding Tanzania in certain areas, both countries have worked together in many fields.

"China emphasizes mutual gains in

its foreign cooperation and ensures that the other side also benefits," Omar said.

Last year China continued to be Tanzania's largest trading partner and biggest investor. The value of trade between January and November was \$7.96 billion, a year-on-year increase of 6.8 percent, according to official figures. Chinese companies made investments worth more than \$11 billion in Tanzania.

China represents a vast market with immense possibilities for Tanzania, Omar said. The prospects for collaboration are substantial, particularly in areas such as agriculture, textiles and apparel, beverages, laser items,

livestock and the maritime economy. He is keen to see provinces in China and regions in Tanzania forge stronger connections and explore collaborative opportunities, he said.

Omar first came to China in 2005. He takes pleasure in exploring its impressive progress by visiting various places, particularly to gain insights into China's development and governance.

In Shenzhen, a model city for China's reform and opening-up, he discovered that the keys to its prosperity lie in being open, having a youthful work force, adopting innovative practices and policies that give priority to people, engaging in sustainable development and having robust manufacturing, he said.

"Socialism with Chinese characteristics is a different kind of governance that one has to know to unpack and try to understand the Chinese context.

This is not one size fits all. It's very important to understand the context of Chinese development and Chinese civilization with different dynasties ... I'm learning about it."

The Belt and Road Initiative has brought tremendous benefits to Africa over the past decade, he said. However, some countries have said the initiative is creating "debt traps", which is "propaganda targeted at China," Omar said.

"African countries need to borrow money during the process of economic development. It is important for the country that borrowed money to make sure that it spends wisely and prudently. China provides loans at preferential interest rates. What is wrong with China doing that?"

Contact the writers at chenyingqun@chinadaily.com.cn.

WORLD US

Talk of working on AI together questioned

By HENG WEILI in New York and YIFAN XU in Washington

While a White House official recently said that the US was willing to cooperate with China on artificial intelligence, an American expert is skeptical that US technology policies are conducive to such cooperation.

Arati Prabhakar, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, told the Financial Times of London in an interview published Thursday that despite the two nations' trade tensions, particularly over sensitive technology, they could work together to "lessen [the] risks and assess [the] capabilities" of AI.

"Steps have been taken to engage in that process," Prabhakar said of collaborating with China on AI. "We have to try to work [with Beijing]."

"We are at a moment where everyone understands that AI is the most powerful technology ... every country is bracing to use it to build a future that reflects their values," said Prabhakar. "But I think the one place we can all really agree is we want to have a technology base that is safe and effective."

Sourabh Gupta, a senior fellow at the Institute for China-America Studies, is skeptical about how such cooperation on AI would unfold.

"The US' desire to work on AI safety policy with China and compete vigorously on AI hardware, including chips, against China, are proceeding on entirely separate tracks," he said.

"The scope for trade-offs is minimal and probably non-existent. As such, the policy conversation between the two will gravitate towards a lowest common denominator approach on preventing fundamental AI-related harms, especially in the military sphere," he said.

"On the other hand, the AI hardware

and software innovation and development side will see bitter competition between the two sides, with the US using its technology controls repeatedly to undercut China's progress in this area," Gupta predicted.

AI was one of the topics discussed when Chinese President Xi Jinping met with US President Joe Biden on Nov 15 on the sidelines of the APEC summit in California.

The White House issued an executive order in August 2023 that restricted US investments in Chinese technologies or products, stating that "countries of concern are engaged in comprehensive, long-term strategies that direct, facilitate, or otherwise support advancements in sensitive technologies and products that are critical to such countries' military, intelligence, surveillance, or cyber-enabled capabilities".

China, along with the US and more than two dozen other countries, signed the Bletchley Declaration on standards for AI at the world's first AI Safety Summit in the UK in November.

At the conclusion of the Nov 1-2 summit, Elon Musk thanked British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for inviting China, saying, "If they're not participants, it's pointless."

Prabhakar told the FT that while the US may disagree with China on how to approach AI regulation, "there will also be places where we can agree", including on global technical and safety standards for software.

Gupta said that he was "afraid there will not be complementary cooperation. As the two sides roll out their respective governing and regulatory frameworks, though, both will have the opportunity to learn from the other sides' successes and mistakes."

"I would also submit that China's guidance on the development of AI is more encompassing than just content

control," he said in reference to the FT article, which suggested that China was more concerned about regulation of domestic AI information while the US was focused on national security and consumer privacy.

Still, he said, "there is much for each side to learn by observing the development of the industry and its regulation on the counterpart's soil".

China's AI industry is expected to accelerate over the next decade, with its market value reaching 1.73 trillion yuan (\$241.3 billion) by 2035, according to research firm CCID Consulting.

Prabhakar said that the US "did not intend to slow down AI development, but to maintain oversight of the technology".

"We are starting to have a global understanding that the tools to assess AI models — to understand how effective, how safe and trustworthy they are — are very weak today," she told the FT.

On Jan 15, at an Axios forum on the sidelines of the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Prabhakar discussed the social influences of AI technology.

"When we talk about artificial intelligence, we tend to talk about it as a technology. But the first thing to realize is that people choose what AI models to build," she said.

"Often it's data that's about or created by human beings, and then they choose what applications to build, and then other people choose how to use those AI models and what to do with them," Prabhakar said.

"So I think if we're going to get to this future which we have to get to with better AI, we have to start by understanding that it's a socio-technical system; it's not just a technology by itself," she said.

Contact the writers at hengweili@chinadailyusa.com.



Visitors talk with staff at a booth representing Hangzhou of East China's Zhejiang province at the 2024 New York Travel & Adventure Show on Saturday. MINGMEI LI / CHINA DAILY

At NYC show, future travelers get glimpse of China's wonders

By MINGMEI LI in New York mingmeili@chinadailyusa.com

By immersing visitors into the features of China's vibrant culture and cities, booths representing the country at the 2024 New York Travel & Adventure Show captivated and motivated potential tourists.

Historic locations such as the ancient city of Pingyao in Shanxi province, major cities such as Hangzhou and Nanjing, and the renowned cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, which merge their deep historical culture with modern urban lifestyles, were on display at the two-day event during the weekend.

"How amazing that I get to work with an artist!" Daisy Arroyo, 53, of Bronx, told China Daily. She was collaborating with a woodblock printing artist and created a piece of a dragon.

"I love art, and Chinese food is amazing, the culture is beautiful and welcoming. I'm looking forward to traveling to China," she said. "I've looked forward to it many years, but I think maybe now it is more accessible."

Arroyo said she also was excited to experiment with ink, brushes and

Xuan paper. She also received a picture of the zodiac signs that she likes to follow, illustrated with a dragon. She said she also wants to visit the Big Buddha and do some meditation.

Wei Zhongli, curator of the Hangzhou Ten Bamboo Studio Art Museum, traveled from Hangzhou in Zhejiang province to present traditional woodblock printing, sharing the story of Chinese traditional artwork.

"This is not just a dragon. This is a 'cute' dragon. Foreigners might think that the traditional dragons in our Chinese mythology are a bit 'fierce', but in our culture, dragons have both a dignified aspect and a cute side," he said.

"This is also a 'living fossil' of one of the four great inventions, printing technology, which allows people all over the world to understand a traditional culture."

Danmay Sahi, a visitor who tried the virtual reality experience of Hangzhou city, told China Daily: "I love everything in general. I love the infrastructure; it's really cool. There are some insane trains that are supposed to be really fast."

"Being in the US makes us very curious about other countries and cultures, and thus we are interested

in visiting other countries," he said.

"People like to travel. I don't see anything that is not great about our relationship — Americans love Chinese food and buy a lot of Chinese things, and Chinese people come to the US to study, visit and shop," he said, adding that visiting China is "definitely on the list".

Ma Yunfei, the director of the China National Tourist Office, told China Daily: "American locals are particularly interested in our Chinese culture and cuisine. Now, especially, they are interested in our domestic 'ice and snow' tourism, seeing the boom in our domestic travel market."

"It's necessary to engage in exchanges with the international community upon full reopening post-pandemic. We'd love to strengthen exchanges between China and the United States, showcasing China's tourism, resources, and culture," he added.

"We see that many Americans are eager to travel to China as soon as possible. Many issues regarding visas have already been resolved. In terms of convenience, we are working to increase our flight capacity and lower ticket prices to facilitate more travel," Ma said.

Biden, Trump trade jabs over plan to halt migrant surge at US border

LAS VEGAS, Nevada — Joe Biden and Donald Trump traded verbal jabs on Saturday over a bipartisan plan for border reform aimed at stemming a surge in migrants crossing into the United States from Mexico.

With immigration one of the hottest electoral issues in what increasingly looks like a Trump-Biden rematch for the White House this year, the fate of the bill being negotiated by the Senate has become a high-stakes battleground.

Republican primary front-runner Trump has put immigration front and center in his campaign, issuing dire warnings about the porous nature of the border — yet has simultaneously pushed back hard against a deal, even as Biden tacks right and promises to temporarily "shut down" the border.

Biden threw his weight behind the proposed bill on Saturday, insisting it would usher in the "toughest" ever set of border reforms.

"It would give me as president the emergency authority to shut down the border until it can get back under

control," Biden said in a speech in South Carolina. "If that bill was law today I'd shut down the border right now and fix it quickly."

Trump has instead continued to castigate Biden over "open borders" as an influx of migrants roils domestic politics. "The border is in play (politically) like it's never been in play before," he said at a campaign speech in Las Vegas on Saturday.

Following Trump's extensive lobbying, Mike Johnson, the speaker of the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, said in an open letter on Friday that any such bill adopted by the Senate would be "dead in the water" and never get passed by the House.

"They're blaming it on me, I said, 'That's OK, blame it on me, please,'" Trump said on Saturday. "I'd rather have no bill than a bad bill."

The historic number of migrants arriving at the border with Mexico during Biden's term is one of the main challenges of his reelection campaign. Immigration was a top issue during Iowa's Republican caucuses earlier

this month when Trump won. An AP VoteCast survey found about 9 in 10 caucusgoers backed building a wall along the US-Mexico border, with about 7 in 10 expressing strong support for the idea.

As Republican Texas Governor Greg Abbott and the federal government engage in a standoff over control over the border, Trump said he would give the state his "full support" and "deploy all necessary military and law enforcement resources to seal up the final section of border".

White House Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton said on Thursday that Biden's administration had been working in "good faith" with Republicans to reach a deal and hoped they would "remain at the table so we can do that".

The US Supreme Court last week agreed to temporarily let US Border Patrol agents cut or remove razor-wire fencing that Texas officials placed along part of the state's border with Mexico to deter illegal crossings.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA



I'll take the lead on this one.
Feel the joy of green transport.



AD

CHINA DAILY USA

NEW YORK HEADQUARTERS

1500 Broadway, Suite 2800, New York, NY 10036

Telephone: 212-537-8888

Fax: 212-537-8898

editor@chinadailyusa.com
readers@chinadailyusa.com

Subscription: 212-537-8899

Advertising: 212-537-8916

Follow us on:

twitter.com/chinadaily

facebook.com/chinadaily

usa.chinadaily.com.cn

These materials are distributed by China

Daily Distribution Corp. on behalf of China Daily Beijing, China. Additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

WASHINGTON

National Press Bldg., Suite 1108
529 14th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20045
Tel: 202-662-7249
Fax: 202-662-7247

SAN FRANCISCO

235 Montgomery Street, Suite 900
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415-348-8288
Fax: 415-348-8388

SEATTLE

800 Fifth Ave., Suite 4100
Seattle, WA 98104
Tel: 206-922-2868

HOUSTON

1001 South Dairy Ashford Suite 100
Houston, TX 77077
Tel: 713-595-7660

CANADA | TORONTO

471 Yonge Street, 10th Floor
Toronto, Ontario, M2N 6K8
Tel: 416-461-5706

CHINA DAILY (ISSN 0748-6154) is published daily except weekends by China Daily USA, 1500 Broadway, Suite 2800, New York, NY 10036. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to CHINA DAILY USA, 1500 Broadway, Suite 2800, New York, NY 10036.

Vol. 38 - No. 1232

BUSINESS

JOIN THE CONVERSATION; FOLLOW US ON TWITTER · CHINA DAILY

Cooperation trumps competition for win-win

Foreign, domestic companies find new ways to shine together as market dynamics change

By ZHONG NAN
zhongnan@chinadaily.com.cn

Decades ago, multinational corporations operating in China employed a simple, two-step formula to manage their businesses: introduce products that proved successful elsewhere already; and use local factories to produce goods for domestic clients.

That sufficed. The vast size of the Chinese market ensured sales revenues were impressive. Success in that sense helped catapult many China-based MNC executives to top corporate echelons. Some even landed in the corner suite of their global headquarters.

Well, all that has become history, thanks to the current complex business landscape. Subdued global investment sentiment, heightened concern over geopolitics and the imperative of technological advancement have all compelled MNCs to revise their China strategy. To stay competitive, many of them are swearing by innovative steps and collaborations with a diverse range of partners. Oftentimes, that is the only way to identify and harness new growth opportunities.

Consequently, long-standing competitors have turned into strategic business partners. Take German automotive giants BMW and Mercedes for example. Late last year, they announced a 50:50 joint venture to develop a charging network in China, the largest market for both of them. Such a course of action was almost unavoidable for them if they had to accelerate efforts toward vehicle electrification.

The proposed JV will seek to establish at least 1,000 high-power charging stations equipped with some 7,000 charging piles by the end of 2026.

The US-based Johnson Controls International Plc is another example. It recently forged a JV with Tianjin Emagin Technology Co Ltd, a Tianjin-headquartered maglev high-speed rotating machinery manufacturer, to focus on driving innovation and energy efficiency in the heating, ventilation and air conditioning, or HVAC, industry.

"This cooperation is not only a new move for us to deepen our investment in China, but also highlights Johnson Controls' determination to continue to serve the local market and contribute to China's sustainability," said Anu Rathninde, president of Johnson Controls Asia-Pacific.

Rathninde also said the two sides will rely on their expertise and integrate their resources in technology innovation, operating systems, talent and more to further enhance the business development, product integration and innovation capabilities, providing global customers with more value-added products and services, and achieving win-win cooperation.

The HVAC industry shares the goals of energy saving and carbon reduction. The application of magnetic levitation technology is an



Visitors are at the zero-carbon city sand table at the exhibition stand of Schneider Electric SE during the 6th China International Import Expo in Shanghai on Nov 7. TIAN YUHAO / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



An employee introduces a robot to a visitor (left) at the exhibition stand of ABB during the 2023 World Robot Conference in Beijing on Aug 18. HUANG YONG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Visitors are at the exhibition stand of Johnson Controls during the 6th China International Import Expo in Shanghai on Nov 8. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

important reform in improving energy efficiency, he said.

These corporate moves highlight the evolving business dynamics in China where cooperation is increasingly favored over competition in the pursuit of mutual growth. The ability to adapt to new market realities is paramount, said Zhang Liqun, a researcher at the Development Research Center of the State Council.

To understand those new realities, a look at China's high-end industries like electronics and electrical equipment would help.

These industries are expanding their global footprint. China's new energy industries like photovoltaics are already world leaders, said Zhao Ping, dean of the academy at the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade.

China is the world's largest manufacturing country whose output accounts for nearly 30 percent of the global total. It ranked first for 14

consecutive years, according to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

Another reality is the persistent decline in global foreign direct investment in 2023 after a comparably strong performance in 2022. FDI in China, in terms of actual use, fell 8 percent year-on-year to 1.13 trillion yuan (\$157.07 billion) in 2023. Yet, it remained at a historically elevated level, data from the Ministry of Commerce showed.

Zhu Bing, director of the department at the Commerce Ministry's foreign investment administration, said it is normal for the scale of foreign investment to fluctuate. There are various reasons for this, including both economic and non-economic factors.

The commerce official listed several factors, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, that might have caused a lag in investment data, bearing in mind the long cycle of investors' investment decisions,

geopolitics and the overall shrinkage in the scale of FDI globally, which fell to \$1.3 trillion in 2022, down about 12 percent from 2021, according to data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

"We welcome multinational companies and small and medium-sized enterprises from overseas to invest in China," Zhu said, adding the cooperation between these businesses and domestic ones is an important new way for foreign investment to enter the Chinese market.

Emphasizing China's economic strengths and its crucial role in global industrial and supply chains, Zhang Wei, vice-president of the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, said that as China continues to progress with its high-level opening-up policies, there are increasing business prospects for foreign companies, particularly in the realms of high-end manufactur-

ing, digital transformation and decarbonization.

The National Bureau of Statistics announced in mid-January that China's GDP grew 5.2 percent year-on-year to a new high of 126.06 trillion yuan in 2023. The country's growth not only outpaces the estimated global growth of 3 percent, but also ranks top among major economies.

"Looking at the numbers, if you look at the size of the Chinese economy, the 'next China' will be China. That is still the largest market in the Asia-Pacific region and even with growth of around 5 percent, the growth of China will be bigger than the whole markets of India and Indonesia combined," said Morten Wierod, president of the electrification business area and a member of the group executive committee of ABB Ltd, a Switzerland-based technology company.

Wierod said that ABB will spend more than \$100 million on research

and development of its electrification business in China over the next three years. The group also leverages China as a hub for exporting its products to various regions, including Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and a number of European markets.

"China is at the forefront of digital innovation and application; which is why, I find it consistently intriguing to visit and witness the rapid changes since my last visit," he said. "I made three trips to China last year (2023), and I anticipate making at least as many this year because the pace of development in China is so rapid that staying away for too long would mean missing out on significant advancements."

Similar views were expressed by Chen Xudong, chairman of IBM China. "As China continues to accelerate industrial upgrading and promote high-standard opening-up, I believe the country has ample policy space to counter economic downturn pressures and explore new growth opportunities in sectors like new energy, artificial intelligence and low-carbon industries."

With the government creating more favorable conditions to promote high-standard opening-up and improve business environment, sustaining such openness will prove a win-win for homegrown companies as well as MNCs, Chen said.

China's high-tech industries attracted 423.34 billion yuan in FDI last year, accounting for more than 37 percent of the country's total utilized FDI, Commerce Ministry data showed.

Although overall FDI in China plummeted in 2023, that from certain countries rose. France's FDI in China rose 84 percent year-on-year, the United Kingdom's jumped 81 percent, the Netherlands' rose 31.5 percent, Switzerland's increased by more than 21 percent and Australia's by 17 percent.

With the global economic landscape showing signs of finding stability against odds, there is high chance still for overall FDI in China to rise, both in terms of scale and composition. This transformation is anticipated to be driven by continuous enhancements in China's business environment, said Gao Lingyun, a researcher at the Institute of World Economics and Politics, which is part of the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

He emphasized that the growing recognition of China's vast market and its robust industrial networks will likely play a pivotal role in refining foreign investment strategies. Technology-intensive green products will notably shape MNCs' investment focus in the years ahead and contribute to China's exports.

Echoing that sentiment, Yin Zheng, executive vice-president of China and East Asia operations, Schneider Electric SE, a French MNC specializing in energy management, said the company will keep strengthening its "China Hub" strategy in all aspects, including talent, innovation, supply chain and ecosystem this year.

"As China has intensified its focus on high-quality development and embraced the 'dual carbon goals' in recent years, there has been a notable increase in demand from Chinese consumers for digital solutions and environmentally friendly products," he said.

China has edge, and it'll continue to attract FDI

REPORTER'S LOG

By Zhong Nan

The trade and economic interplay between China and the rest of the world has been evolving fast due to a variety of seemingly disparate and diverse factors like MNCs, foreign direct investment, free trade agreements, technology, manpower, international law, and industrial and supply chains.

For MNCs in China, first came years of expansion, followed by the ongoing transformation. Their focus has shifted from bringing in technology, contributing to the supply chain and establishing interna-

tional sales networks to integrating their core competencies with China's emerging competitive advantages and making greater efforts toward both their own growth and that of the Chinese economy.

For MNCs, China doesn't just boast valuable market resources; it also has strong R&D capabilities. The nation's substantial talent pool is a big positive. A large number of science and engineering graduates emerge each year. The cost of employing engineers in China is notably lower compared to the United States and Europe.

Combined with the ongoing enhancements to the business environment, which are supported by government resources, these factors are uniquely advantageous and hard to find outside of China.

To be sure, in the post-pandemic

era, some new trends have had a significant impact on global investment. The significant interest rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve have caused substantial disruptions to global capital flows. In addition, the substantial subsidies offered by the US for electric vehicles, clean energy and similar initiatives have diverted foreign investment funds globally.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated corporate digital transformation, leading to increased activity in related investment.

Apart from continuing to open up its services sector and strengthening international cooperation by sealing free trade deals with more countries and regions, China needs to closely monitor the changes in greenfield investment because such investment can lead to increased local production capacity and employment.

Greenfield investment refers to a type of foreign direct investment where a parent company creates a new subsidiary in a foreign country by constructing new operational facilities from the ground up.

Since many Western countries led by the US have been gradually bypassing the international economic and trade rules established by the World Trade Organization in recent years, they have started to establish or update regional free trade agreements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the new version of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Although the Geneva-headquartered WTO provides mechanisms for resolving trade disputes between its members, it remains an international organization with relatively

limited authority. In the end, the effectiveness of the WTO hinges on the willingness of its members to adhere to dispute settlement procedures and uphold the established rules. When a country refuses to implement the decisions made by the appellate body, potentially sparking retaliatory actions from other nations, it can foster a surge in protectionist tendencies.

Some agreements can be seen as upgrades to existing trade agreements. By signing these regional FTAs and upgrading international economic and trade rules, the countries concerned have essentially entered another level in conducting trade and investment activities.

However, for this, they focus on many areas, including digital trade, artificial intelligence and services trade. If China can't maintain pace in these domains, there is a potential risk of its attraction for foreign investors dimming.

Moreover, the rise of intermediate

trade has pushed countries to reduce government regulatory measures, tariff and production barriers, demanding a business environment with zero or low tariffs, as well as favorable investment and trade policies to seamlessly integrate industrial, supply and value chains.

As MNCs engage in production across multiple countries, they need to consider the business environment when planning their production layouts. If there are significant differences in investment and trade policies among countries, MNCs' efforts to lay out their industrial chains may encounter many difficulties, affecting their investment behavior.

So, China's pilot free trade zones and massive market, together with well-developed infrastructure, supply and industrial chains, will continue to play a key role in attracting FDI in the coming years. These advantages are unparalleled when compared to emerging countries such as Vietnam, India and Mexico.

BUSINESS



A tech expert (left) from Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co introduces the functions of a tire product to a visitor at its booth during the International Consumer Electronics Show 2024, held in Las Vegas in early January. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Goodyear eyes partnerships with Chinese auto players

US company sees growth in tire intelligence, connectivity, recycled materials

By ZHONG NAN
zhongnan@chinadaily.com.cn

Fueled by an automobile production boom and green transformation in China, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co plans to partner with more Chinese automakers and passenger transportation platforms to maintain robust growth in the country, a senior executive of the United States-based tire manufacturer said.

Numerous opportunities have arisen from the eagerness shown by Chinese automakers and technology companies to embrace new technologies that have boosted the utilization of new energy sources and electric vehicles. Moreover, the free trade agreements forged between China and other countries, along with surging demand from businesses for sustainable tires, is pushing up the momentum, said Chris Helsel, senior vice-president for global operations and chief technology officer of Goodyear.

As major Chinese as well as international brands expect sales to grow at a fast clip this year,

Helsel said the group anticipates continued growth in China, especially in the areas of tire intelligence, connectivity and recycling materials.

"Additionally, we are focused on growth within specific segments of the tire industry. These include the growth of large rim diameter tires, high-performance tires, sport utility vehicle tires and electric vehicle tires. These are our key areas of investment in technology," he added.

According to data from the Beijing-based China Association of Automobile Manufacturers, local and international automakers in China manufactured a record 30.16 million vehicles last year. They also delivered 30.09 million units, another record, marking an increase of 11.6 percent and 12 percent year-on-year, respectively.

With China entering a new era of green and innovation-led growth, Helsel said that Goodyear believes that tire intelligence, which is currently a relatively small part of its business, will also experience significant growth. The company sees connected tires and tire intelligence as sources of future growth.

Eager to boost its earnings, the Akron, Ohio-headquartered company sealed collaborative deals with a number of partners, including Japan's TDK Corp, Germany's ZF Friedrichshafen AG, a Dutch research organization, to improve its abilities in fields such as sen-

sors, anti-lock brake systems and sustainable materials during the International Consumer Electronics Show 2024 held in Las Vegas in early January.

Goodyear also announced a strategic collaboration with China's Didi Autonomous Driving, the self-driving arm of Chinese ride-hailing firm Didi Global Inc, late last year, to explore innovative technologies that can enable the further development of advanced forms of mobility.

Goodyear, which supplies tires to a large number of car manufacturers such as Tesla Inc, General Motors, BYD, Nio and Geely in both foreign and Chinese markets, is prepared to increase production volume, expand existing facilities and open new factories in certain locations to support the growth of its partners in the auto industry, the executive added.

"I appreciate the advancements that all the Chinese car manufacturers have made in taking a leading role in electric vehicles, battery technologies and in software-designed vehicles," said Helsel.

The group, he said, will work with distributors to expand its sales networks in China's lower-tier cities in the years ahead.

Upbeat about the Chinese market, Goodyear started the construction of the second phase of its factory in Kunshan, Jiangsu province in 2023.

The project, which is expected

to be completed by the end of this year, is valued at \$200 million and is capable of producing 2.6 million radial tires for passenger vehicles annually. The project will bring in an additional 700 million yuan (\$97 million) in annual operating income.

Supported by 72,200 employees across the world, Goodyear currently runs three plants and two innovation centers in China with more than 4,000 staff members.

Benefiting from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the US company also ships tires manufactured by its plants in China to Japan and a number of Southeast Asian countries.

China's continuous industrial advancement and commitment to environmental sustainability will enhance the nation's competitive position, making several multinational corporations show strong interest in establishing new innovation and manufacturing facilities, said Bai Ming, a researcher at the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation.

He said that facilitating a seamless integration of the digital economy with the traditional industrial sector will be crucial to achieving a new phase of industrialization in China. This integration will give rise to "new infrastructure", innovative application models, and an upgraded industrial ecosystem, he said.

Beverage brands rapidly expand overseas presence

GOING GLOBAL |

By ZHENG YIRAN
zhengyiran@chinadaily.com.cn

Chinese fresh beverages brands are expanding their businesses overseas, gradually integrating into local communities and winning the hearts of consumers through high-quality products and services.

On Jan 2, Mixue Group, a beverage maker based in Zhengzhou, Henan province with over 36,000 stores at home and abroad, applied for an initial public offering in Hong Kong.

The IPO application is being viewed as a step forward in the company's globalization strategy, as it accelerates efforts to enhance consumer awareness and build a brand that is renowned globally.

As a major Chinese new-style tea beverage brand that is going international, Mixue has taken active part in the nation's Belt and Road Initiative, and has been speeding up expansion in overseas markets since its first store opened in Vietnam in 2018.

Data from the company show that as of Sept 30 last year, Mixue had established around 4,000 outlets in 11 countries and regions beyond China.

According to China Insights Consultancy, in terms of the number of overseas stores by that time, Mixue ranked first among all new-style tea drinks brands in Southeast Asia.

"In 2012, we became the first in China's freshly made beverages industry to establish centralized factories. We operate the largest and most comprehensive end-to-end supply chain in the industry, according to CIC," the IPO prospectus of Mixue showed.

"At present, it has built a complete industrial system that integrates agricultural technology support, centralized procurement from production areas, product R&D, central factory production, self-built logistics, store operation management, and customer service. The end-to-end supply chain is complete," CIC said in its report.

Mixue owns five major production bases in Henan, Hainan and Anhui

provinces; the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region; and Chongqing, taking up a total area of 670,000 square meters to generate an annual output of 1.43 million metric tons.

To further increase operational efficiency, Mixue has established a self-operated warehouse system that consists of 26 warehouses nationwide and takes up over 300,000 sq m.

To support its overseas business, Mixue has built localized warehouse systems. As of Sept 30, it had built 11 self-operated warehouses in four Southeast Asian countries with a total area of 66,000 sq m.

Chinese consumer goods brands, represented by new-style tea beverage brands, are going global one after another, winning the hearts of local consumers in the process.

Following Chinese technology enterprises that have gained in popularity among consumers in Southeast Asia, new-style beverage brands such as Mixue, Chagee and Luckin Coffee are also quickly expanding businesses there, said Lianhe Zaobao, a Chinese-language newspaper in Singapore.

Spicy hot pot, a traditional cuisine from Sichuan province, is also turning into a new favorite for people overseas, the paper said in a report.

On Jan 4, Naixue opened its first direct store in Bangkok. The store, which takes up two floors and nearly 200 sq m, is located in Emsphere, a high-end shopping mall in the Thai capital.

Meanwhile, a Heytea outlet in the Soho area of London has been well-received by consumers.

According to the report by CIC, by 2028, the global market scale of freshly made beverages is estimated to surpass \$1.1 trillion, and the rapid expansion of emerging markets, particularly China and Southeast Asia, will be the key contributor.

"The export of freshly made beverages has reached a natural stage, and with the continuous improvement of the comprehensive strength of leading enterprises such as Mixue, going abroad is a good opportunity to test their supply chain integrity and overseas market adaptability," said Zhu Danpeng, an independent food and beverages analyst.



Consumers line up outside a Mixue store on its opening day in Sydney, Australia, on Feb 12. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ifaw
国际爱护动物基金会

WWF
世界自然基金会

Growling tigers, guardians of the forest

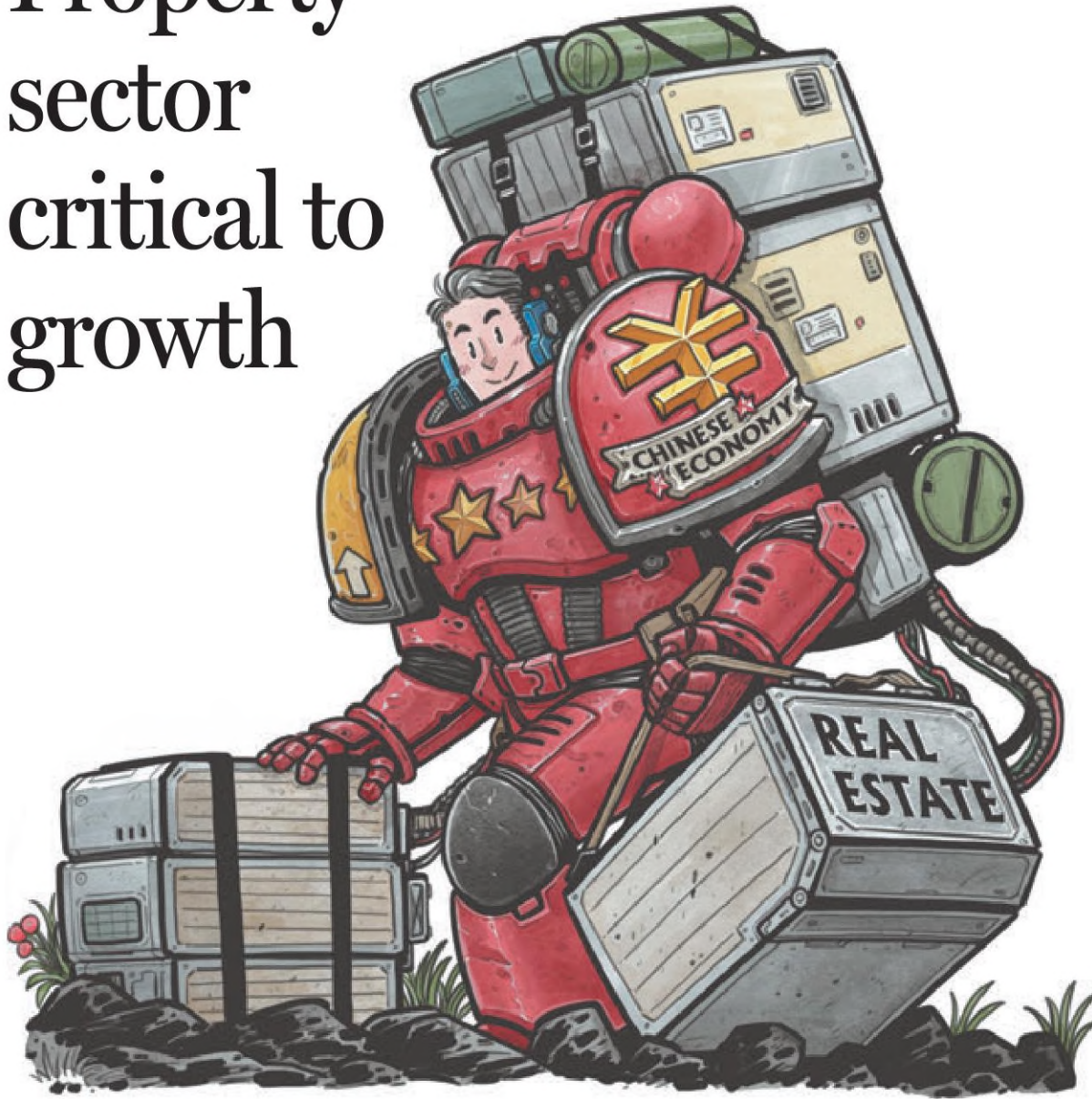
Between heaven and earth, together with other sentient beings, I live.

—Zhangyi's Qi Wu Lun (Essay on Being Things as Equal)

AD

BUSINESSINSIGHT

Property sector critical to growth



CAI MENG / CHINA DAILY

EAGLE EYE

By Liu Ligang

The outlook for China's property sector will have a huge impact on China's growth, investment, and consumer confidence this year. In response, Beijing must make timely and decisive policy interventions when room for policy changes and policy tools are still available and effective, in order to avoid repeating a balance-sheet recession that Japan experienced between 1991 and 2013.

Since the July meeting of China's top leadership, the country has launched a series of policies covering fiscal, monetary, consumption and property sectors with an aim to sustain a post-COVID-19 economic recovery. These policies, having helped produce a 5.2 percent GDP growth for 2023, are yet to bring about strong confidence in the Chinese economy. On the one hand, the renminbi is still facing depreciation pressure; on the other, both A shares onshore and H shares offshore haven't reacted positively to the policies enacted so far.

Central to the issue is the property market. Following more than two decades of rapid growth and price appreciation, the "three-red-lines" policy package, implemented in 2020, has put an abrupt end to the model of high-leverage, rapid turnover, and high-profitability widely adopted by developers, leading to widespread defaults of the US dollar bonds issued in Hong Kong and RMB bonds onshore. Meanwhile, the demand side has also undergone drastic changes. While vacancy ratios are high in both commercial and residential properties, demographic change suggests that future demand is diminishing fast. While China's population fell by 2.08 million last year, the number of newlywed couples dropped by almost 50 percent in 2022 to below 7 million, compared with that of five years ago. Aging population and declining fertility rate all suggest shrinking housing demand.

At this stage, the property sector is still an indispensable engine of growth. Property sector contributes

20 percent of fiscal revenue, stores 70 percent of household wealth, generates 24 percent of GDP, and takes in 25 percent of bank loans. Owing to the slump experienced in the property sector, the consumer price index (CPI) inflation was only 0.2 percent in 2023, and the PPI has been in the deflationary zone for more than 20 months. If one were to use the GDP deflator to benchmark China's overall price dynamics, the economy has already entered a deflationary territory since the second quarter of last year.

Signs of balance-sheet recession loom on the horizon. The private sector, including both households and private enterprises, has started to deleverage, judging from rising household bank deposits, which amounted to around 17 trillion yuan (\$2.4 trillion) and 15 trillion yuan in 2022 and 2023, respectively, and declining investment among private firms.

Falling property prices, together with significant oversupply in the urban property market, suggest the negative wealth effect will kick in, which serves to reduce income of the households and depress future consumption. This is indeed a portentous ingredient of Japan's balance-sheet recession.

Unlike Japan during its lost decades after the collapse of its property bubble, China faces its own significant structural challenges. While it is still a middle-income economy, its economic structure is very much imbalanced, with excessive investment, too much dependency on exports and insufficient domestic consumption. Debt, especially SOE and local government debt, remains quite high. The property market malaise, together with the structural imbalances, will likely inhibit China's leap over the middle-income trap.

Also different from Japan after its property bubble collapse, China faces serious external challenges. The high tariffs imposed on Chinese exports from the Trump era will continue to stay, which will lead to continuous, though gradual, relocation of supply chains, risking of hollowing out China's manufacturing base. Meanwhile, the US "small-yard high-fence" technology policy intended against China will also

prevent high-tech spillover, slowing China's technology catch-up process and its potential GDP growth on the way.

These challenges will thus require urgent and decisive policy interventions to tackle the property market downturn head-on, so as to avoid repeating the policy mistakes of Japan in its post-property bubble era.

The good news is that China still has policy room and tools, and the authorities can also learn from the lessons as well as the experiences of other countries when dealing with its property market challenges.

- Both policy rate and the reserve requirement ratio, or money banks must hold as reserves, can be lowered more substantially. The one-year MLF (medium-term lending facility) policy interest rate is still 2.5 percent and the loan prime rate, or LPR, is 3.45 percent. As deflation risk looms, the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, can cut interest rate by maximum 250 base points in theory. Given that the RRR for large financial institutions is at 10.5 percent, there is also a large room to lower RRR to inject a large amount of liquidity into the banking system.

- More efforts could be made to engage in significant countercyclical fiscal policy stimulus. Given the central government debt is less than 23 percent of the GDP, compared to Japan's 221 percent and the US' 120 percent, it has huge room to issue a large amount of central government debt. The proceeds could be used to engage in much-needed soft infrastructure investment in areas like education, healthcare, research and development, and basic research with an aim to reduce precautionary savings motives and ensure long-term sustained economic growth.

- China has the advantage of learning from the Japanese lessons. It took Bank of Japan, Japan's central bank, six years to lower its policy interest rate from 6 percent to 1 percent after the burst of the asset bubble, and then three more years to lower the policy rate to zero percent. Such policies were too little and too late, leading to solidifying of deflationary expectation. In addition, the

restructuring of property bad debts had not really begun until a banking crisis took place in 1998.

- China can also learn from the experience of the United States in dealing with the major financial crisis in 2008 and 2009. In response to these challenges, the US Fed quickly cut interest rates to zero percent and then implemented QE (quantitative easing). The US Treasury also brought into play a \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) fund, allowing the government to purchase toxic assets and equity from troubled financial institutions. Such a government-led approach to restructuring troubled asset has led to a rapid divestment and restructuring of subprime mortgage assets. Given China also has four central-government and many provincially owned asset management companies, they should be given the fund and mandate to engage in rapid bad asset restructuring. Such a policy will not only ensure the completion of pre-sale houses but also anchor the expectation of housing prices.

- Beijing can also make good use of its own institutional advantages. China still has room for further urbanization. Except for some big cities, the government can fully liberalize the household registration system to allow rural population to move to non-tier-1 cities to live without much restriction.

- Finally, land is also in the hands of the government. In areas of property surplus, the local government can engage in land buy-back, stop selling land, as well as collect and store excess real estate assets as ways to curb the negative impact of the property sector on the Chinese economy.

These policies, if taken in a timely and decisive manner, can help ensure that China will not repeat the prolonged balance-sheet recession Japan suffered in its post-property bubble era.

The writer is vice-president of Hong Kong Institution of International Finance. He is a former managing director and head of APAC Economic Research of Citi Global Wealth. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Proper monetary, liquidity policies key to economic tailwinds

MAIN STREET

By Wen Bin and Wang Jingwen

The Chinese economy concluded 2023 on a stable note, achieving its annual target with a year-on-year GDP growth rate of 5.2 percent.

The growth rates for each quarter followed a distinctive N-shaped pattern, with Q1 at 4.5 percent, Q2 at 6.3 percent, Q3 at 4.9 percent and Q4 at 5.2 percent.

A closer examination of the data for December showed that, as the effect of macroeconomic policies kicked in, the national economy maintained a steady recovery momentum, with most indicators showing improvement or stability, except for the real estate sector.

Looking ahead to 2024, it is expected that the government will set a growth target of around 5 percent. Policy measures will be strengthened to effectively address concerns about deflation and push the actual growth rate closer to the potential growth level.

China's economy faced a challenging landscape throughout last year, marked by external pressures and internal difficulties. It, however, managed to maintain its recovery momentum and achieve the annual target, showcasing resilience and adaptability.

The overall development of the economy in 2023 can be characterized as "wavelike progress with twists and turns", as it experienced better-than-expected growth in the first quarter, a rebound in the second, and a bottoming-out recovery in the second half of the year.

China's industrial and service sectors have demonstrated resilience and maintained steady growth, contributing to the overall stability of the country's economy.

The country's value-added industrial output, an important economic indicator, went up 4.6 percent year-on-year in 2023, surpassing the 3.6 percent growth recorded in 2022. Notably, various subsectors within manufacturing reflected different growth patterns, indicating ongoing efforts to upgrade the industry.

According to official data, high-tech industries experienced an average growth rate of 4.6 percent over the past two years, up from 4.1 percent, and general equipment manufacturing rebounded from a slight decline of 0.1 percent to an average growth rate of 0.5 percent during the same period.

The retail sales of consumer goods, a major indicator of the country's consumption strength, climbed 7.2 percent year-on-year in 2023, outpacing the 0.2 percent overall fall in the year before. While indicating a weak recovery in consumer spending, the foundation for sustained growth remains to be consolidated.

Meanwhile, China's per capita disposable income increased by 6.1 percent in real terms throughout the course of the year, surpassing the GDP growth rate and progressively getting closer to pre-pandemic income growth rates.

Concerns about the future have influenced consumer sentiment. An uncertain economic environment, coupled with ongoing adjustments in the real estate and capital markets, have dampened consumer confidence. As a result, individuals have become more cautious in their spending habits, prioritizing savings and financial security.

Stimulating consumption

Going forward, China's employment pressure is expected to alleviate, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are also anticipated to gradually fade over time.

Furthermore, the Central Economic Work Conference — where Chinese top leaders charted the course for the economy in 2024 — has emphasized the need to stimulate potential consumption, indicating positive prospects for consumer spending, particularly in goods consumption, while service consumption is expected to remain resilient.

However, the overall growth rate, which may be slightly lower than the previous year due to the drag

from a high base, is projected to be around 5.5 percent in 2024.

Fixed-asset investment experienced a modest year-on-year growth of 3 percent throughout 2023. Although the full-year figure rose by 0.1 percentage point compared to the period from January to November, the growth rate remained lower than the 5.1 percent recorded in the previous year.

The resilience of infrastructure investments and the accelerated pace of investment in the manufacturing sector were the main drivers of this growth.

Official data showed that infrastructure investment experienced a robust year-on-year growth of 5.9 percent in 2023, while manufacturing investment recorded a growth rate of 6.5 percent. However, private investment witnessed a slight decline, falling by 0.4 percent compared to the previous year.

This year, it is anticipated that infrastructure investment will continue to play a crucial role in supporting the economy, with a projected annual growth rate of about 5 percent. The recovery of exports and increased production capacity are expected to contribute to the revival of manufacturing investment, with its growth rate expected to reach around 7 percent.

In addition, private investment, buoyed by a package of well-focused supportive policies, is also expected to show signs of recovery, with a projected growth rate of approximately 2 percent.

For the entire year 2023, China's investment in real estate development fell by 9.6 percent compared to the previous year. The outcomes mostly matched what the market had anticipated.

The real estate market is expected to encounter ongoing challenges in 2024. Inadequate income confidence, weak housing price expectations, and mistrust in presale property may dampen residents' confidence in making significant financial commitments, including taking on additional debt for housing purchases.

However, policies such as the consecutive reduction of over-five-year loan prime rate, on which many lenders base their mortgage rates, as well as improved market conditions, may help sustain sales in the real estate sector. The sales area of commercial housing this year is expected to remain comparable to that of 2023.

Economic road map

In order to kick-start the economic agenda for the year and set a positive trajectory, China should pursue a prudent monetary policy in a flexible and appropriate way and maintain a proper and adequate liquidity supply, to create a favorable monetary and financial environment in better service of the real economy.

The central bank's decision on Jan 15 to extend operations of the medium-term lending facility without a policy rate cut indicates a cautious approach to managing liquidity in the financial system. Market analysts and experts anticipate that a more relaxed monetary policy is on the horizon, with expectations centered on the months of March and April.

Besides, China has adopted a moderate expansionary fiscal policy aimed at bolstering economic growth this year, with focus on maintaining appropriate expenditure levels, rationalizing government investment scales, increasing transfer payments, and optimizing tax and fee policies.

It is anticipated that the deficit rate target for 2024 will fall within the range of 3 percent to 3.5 percent, while the scale of special bonds is expected to be around 4 trillion yuan (\$566.1 billion).

Drawing from international practices, it may be worthwhile for China to consider establishing a specialized institution under central government auspices to acquire distressed real estate firms or projects, ensuring the smooth mitigation of market risks.

Wen Bin is chief economist at China Minsheng Bank; Wang Jingwen is director of the Macro Research Center affiliated to the China Minsheng Bank Research Institute. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

COMMENT

Editorials

Determining boundaries necessary to prevent overstretching of 'national security' concerns

Officially, the Joe Biden administration's China policy is, in the words of United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken, "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be".

Unfortunately, the assertion means that the US does not seek decoupling only applies when it comes to sectors deemed to be irrelevant to national security.

As the latest developments in Washington indicate, the overwhelming consensus there, from the executive to the legislative branches of the US government, is to make sure China lags far behind the US in high technology on the grounds of national security concerns.

On Friday, the US Commerce Department released the "Know Your Customer", or "Customer Identification" program for public comment. The proposal requires US cloud companies to identify and report to their government which foreign entities are using US data centers to train AI models. The main target of the move is China.

"We can't have non-state actors or China or folks who we don't want accessing our cloud to train their models," US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo told Reuters. This was a follow-up to previous moves by her department aimed at denying China access to advanced chips, related equipment, materials, technology, and investment. The idea is to "shut down every avenue that the Chinese could have to get access to our models or to train their own models", as Raimondo said in an interview last month.

"It is a big deal," she said. So big that some believe it signals the next stage of Washington's technology war against China. But as many in science and technology have observed, it also marks a significant setback for international scientific and technological collaboration.

Washington, however, seems ready to do whatever it takes to make sure China lags far behind the US and damn the consequences.

This was also evident from the fact that both chambers of the US Congress saw bipartisan bills on Thursday aimed at banning Chinese genomics company BGI in the US market. BGI has been a leading supplier of genetic sequencing equipment in the US. The bills, backed by leaders of a House Select Committee on China and the Senate Homeland Security Committee, accuse BGI of gathering genetic information about Americans and others in ways that could undermine US national security.

During his meeting with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Bangkok on Friday and Saturday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi again raised Beijing's concerns about Washington's national security abuses. Each country has national security concerns, Wang said, but they must be just and reasonable.

Since both sides reportedly agreed to further discuss the boundary between national security and economic activities, they should begin those discussions as soon as possible.

Airdrop bid to sensationalize Manila as 'victim'

The quasi-live broadcast on Jan 21 of the Philippine military hedgehopping a Cessna-208B aircraft to airdrop supplies of life necessities to personnel stationed on the *Sierra Madre*, the ship it grounded on Ren'ai Reef in 1999, offers much food for thought.

To begin with, nobody is stopping the delivery of such supplies to the vessel. It couldn't be more obvious that Manila's motive was to create a sensational effect. Given the limited amounts of the supplies that can be provided through airdrops, it was a means Manila gave up on a decade ago. But with the presence of the media on the US-gifted surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, as well as on nearby Filipino planes and ships, the spectacle could be broadcast as though it was airdrop to West Berlin at the height of the Cold War.

Out of humanitarianism, Beijing has long acquiesced in life necessities being delivered to the small number of military personnel stationed on the vessel. But it prevents building materials being delivered to the ship, in the hope that with the ship's collapse, which is becoming increasingly imminent, the dispute can be resolved through negotiations.

This intention, which fully conveys Beijing's strategic composure and forbearance, was well understood by Manila, and had evolved into a tacit understanding between the two sides, until the United States urged the Philippines to turn the rusting wreck into a permanent outpost on the reef.

Notably, Manila released some video clips and photos on the same day as it broadcast its Ren'ai Reef airdrops, which show China Coast Guard

ships driving away Philippine fishing boats in waters near Huangyan Island in the South China Sea on Jan 12. But it failed to mention that the Philippine fishing boats were trespassing in Chinese waters without China's consent.

Highlighting Manila's provocative intentions, the Philippine military has also unveiled a grand infrastructure upgrading plan covering all disputed islands it occupies in the South China Sea.

These incidents clearly expose that Manila feels no qualms about breaking the consensus it had reached with Beijing at the eighth Meeting of the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea in Shanghai on Jan 17. At that meeting, the two sides agreed that they should refrain from making any provocative moves that will further escalate tensions so as to create an atmosphere conducive to solution-oriented dialogue.

With its actions, the Philippine side has effectively ruined the trust that had been generated after much painstaking effort. By saying one thing and doing another, Manila has revealed that its true intention has never been to resolve its maritime disputes with China through dialogue, but to leverage the support of the US as an accomplice in smash and grab raids.

That it took nearly a week for the Chinese side to officially comment on the two incidents indicates that although Beijing will no doubt have made representations to Manila to stop its aggravating antics, its shenanigans will not prompt Beijing to abandon its long-term forbearance. Beijing continues to keep the bigger picture of overall bilateral ties and regional stability in mind.

ICJ effectively orders Israel to cease and desist

A 17-judge panel of the International Court of Justice declared on Friday that Palestinians had a right to be protected from acts of genocide. They called on Israel to "take all measures within its power" to prevent acts which could fall foul of the 1948 Genocide Convention, and to allow the entry of desperately needed humanitarian aid into the Palestinian enclave.

There was no explicit call for an immediate halt to Israel's full-scale military operation in the Gaza Strip in the provisional ruling on the case brought against Israel by South Africa. But the court said it was deeply concerned about the continuing loss of life and human suffering in Gaza, and "acutely aware of the extent of the human tragedy unfolding in the region".

When innocent Palestinian people have been displaced from their homes, do not have provisions for maintaining subsistence, and are even placed at risk of being killed at any time, the ICJ's orders should function as a call for the international community to show enough concern for what has been happening to Palestinian people in Gaza.

The ICJ also ordered Israel to "prevent and punish the direct and public incitement to commit genocide", and Hamas to release all the remaining hostages it is holding.

Israel was also ordered to preserve evidence related to allegations of genocide and report back to the court on its compliance with these measures in a month.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres underscored in a statement that despite being a provisional judgment the "decisions of the Court are binding" and all parties should duly comply with the order from the Court.

As far as the security of Israel is concerned, the attacks on innocent Israelis and young people from other countries participating in a music gala in early October last year should definitely be condemned. But while Israel has the right to defend itself and bring the perpetrators to justice, it does not have the right to punish the Palestinian people as a whole for that.

The court pointed out that its provisional measures are necessary as there is "a real and imminent risk that irreparable prejudice will be caused to the rights" of Palestinians before the court issues its final decision, which is expected to take at least a year.

The ICJ's decisions cannot be appealed, but it has no way of enforcing them. In addition, it did not order Israel to end its military action in Gaza. Israel will certainly continue its military operation.

Yet, the ICJ's orders serve as a reminder to Israel that the world is watching what it is doing. The orders should also prompt some major countries to stop turning a blind eye to what Israel is doing in Gaza. They should stand with the rest of the international community and do whatever they can to mediate a cease-fire.

Zhao Guopin



Opinion Line

Europe's risk coefficient not reduced by NATO's expansion

On Tuesday, after 20 months of haggling, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey approved a motion on Sweden's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Sweden now only needs Hungary's approval to join NATO.

Due to Kurdish issues, bilateral relations between Sweden and Turkey became tense in 2019 and 2023. In July 2023, Turkey proposed at the NATO summit that it would give a green light to Sweden's entry to NATO in exchange for the purchase of 40 F-16 fighter planes from the United States. The US Congress said that only after Turkey approves Sweden's accession to NATO can it approve the deal. But reports indicate that the Joe Biden administration has already given the nod to the deal.

In this bargaining process, Finland also lifted the arms embargo it had imposed on Turkey. So it can

be said that Turkey basically got what it wanted.

After Turkey's move, Hungary, which had previously blocked Sweden's accession to NATO, also showed signs of a change of mind. However, the Swedish side said that there is no reason to negotiate with Hungary on the issue of joining NATO. If so, its accession to NATO may be delayed for some time.

Even if Hungary and Sweden conduct relevant dialogue, it will take some time for the former to make the decision on the issue. Therefore, although Sweden is only one step away from joining NATO, no one can be 100 percent sure about it.

But although it is not a member yet, Sweden has participated in many of NATO activities. In March 2023, Sweden signed a letter of intent with Norway, Finland and Denmark to establish a joint air force presence at NATO military

bases in Germany. The four countries plan to establish a joint air force with more than 400 fighter planes, develop joint air combat concepts within the NATO framework, and connect command systems and equipment with the NATO air force.

In addition, on Wednesday, NATO held a military exercise that will last for four months, which is the largest military exercise in NATO's history since the end of the Cold War. Apart from the 31 members of NATO, Sweden will also participate in it.

After the end of the Cold War, NATO has expanded six times from 16 members to 31 now. However, the expansion has not improved the security situation in Europe. Even if NATO expands to 32 countries, it may not reduce Europe's risk factor.

— BEIJING NEWS

Enduring tales with contrasting characteristics

We will soon enter the Year of the Dragon. Or should that be the Year of the *Loong*? That is a question that has been a subject for debate in China, as some say there is a difference between the two in Chinese and Western mythology.

They point to dragons in the West being usually depicted as malevolent, fire-breathing creatures that hoard treasure and terrorize villages. Dragons they say are typically seen as symbols of chaos and evil, portrayed as antagonists in Western mythology and literature, and often depicted as malevolent adversaries to be vanquished by valiant heroes. These depictions hark back to the archetypal myths of the ancient Mesopotamian and Near Eastern cultures, in which dragon-like creatures, such as Tiamat in Mesopotamian mythology are forces of chaos and destruction that are confronted and ultimately defeated in a great battle.

Such symbolic resonance can be seen in the enduring appeal of dragons in Western popular culture today where they are staples of fantasy literature, films, video games, and TV shows, often embodying a mix of awe-inspiring and fearsome qualities that put them at the heart of struggles between good and evil.

In Chinese culture, *loong* are revered as symbols of power, excellence, and good luck, and they are often depicted as wise and kind creatures.

The *loong* has been a central motif in Chinese culture for thousands of years, and its origins can be traced back to early Chinese civilization through mythology, folklore and religious beliefs. Since *loong* were believed to have control over natural phenomena such as rain, storms and water, and were associated with the life-giving properties of water and the fertility of

the land, *loong* became symbols of strength and good fortune, and they became associated with balance, harmony and the natural order of the universe.

Representing auspiciousness, vitality and the power of nature, *loong* remain a revered and beloved symbol in Chinese society, reflecting the enduring significance of historical traditions in modern China.

The differences in perception of the mythical creatures in China and the West are rooted in their different cultural values.

Thus the answer to the question at the beginning is clear: Whether or not to use *loong* instead of dragon is not important. What is important is that as we enter a new lunar year people globally appreciate the cultural values embodied in such Chinese symbols as *loong*.

— ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

China-France relations strong anchor for stability

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and France. France was the first major Western country to establish formal diplomatic relations with China. The two countries forming diplomatic relations in 1964 opened the door for cooperation between China and the West during the Cold War.

In the past 60 years, despite the changes in the international situation, China-France relations have always been at the forefront of China's relations with Western countries. The two sides highlighted the "China-France spirit" of independence and self-reliance, mutual understanding, foresight

and mutual benefit.

Analysts say that spirit is a "golden key" to understanding China-France relations. It is their common upholding of independence and autonomy that has enabled them to overcome the impact of changes in the international situation, focus on cooperation, and properly manage their differences.

Although some countries are trying to start a new Cold War today, there are no geopolitical conflicts or fundamental conflicts of interest between China and France. Through regular dialogue and communication, political mutual trust is continuously consolidated, practical cooperation is expanded, and

cultural exchanges are promoted.

Currently, France is China's third-largest trading partner in the European Union and the third-largest source of actual investment, while China is France's largest trading partner in Asia. During French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to China in April 2023, the two sides reached a series of important cooperation agreements, agreeing to cultivate new growth points for cooperation in the services trade, green development and technological innovation.

The more unstable the world becomes, the more important Sino-French cooperation becomes.

— CHINA MEDIA GROUP

CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

China Daily
15 HuiXin Dongjie Chaoyang District,
Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366
editor@chinadaily.com.cn
Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631
ads@chinadaily.com.cn
Subscription: +86-400-699-0203
subscription.chinadaily.com.cn
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

China Daily UK
90 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chinadailyuk.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
China Daily Hong Kong
Unit 1818, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan
Praya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2518 5111
editor@chinadailyhk.com
editor@chinadailyasia.com

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036
+1 212 537 8888
editor@chinadailyusa.com

China Daily Africa
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254 (0) 20 242 8589 (Nairobi)
editor@chinadailyafrica.com
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

COMMENT



China and the World Roundtable | Silver Economy

Editor's note: China recently released a guideline for developing the "silver economy" as part of its efforts to address the challenges of population aging. Prioritizing the well-being of its senior citizens, China is taking measures to improve the healthcare and other essential services for the elderly people, and expedite the development of the eldercare industry. Three experts share their views on the issue with China Daily.

Stuart Gietel-Basten

Aging a challenge but also an opportunity

China is home to a rapidly aging population today because of decades of low fertility rates, tremendous improvements in the health of the people and a low mortality rate. But the general consensus around the world is that this demographic shift represents some kind of existential threat to China's social and healthcare systems, as well as its economic (and maybe even political) role in the world.



The author is a professor of social sciences and public policy at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

This view, however, is far too simplistic. Population aging is simply a new demographic reality for many countries and one which is intrinsically neither negative nor positive. It is only how countries respond to this change through their institutions, and policies and their implementation that will determine whether they prosper or not. In fact, the early stages of population aging helped drive China's remarkable economic growth over the past decades as the country turned a large working-age population into a powerful productive workforce — what we call the "first demographic dividend".

While the early stages of population aging can be conducive to economic growth, many economists argue that there can also be a "second demographic dividend": the creation of a market in which a large group of senior citizens with relatively high rates of savings consume goods and services at a higher rate. This is often called a "silver market" or "silver economy".

These goods and services can include lifestyle and health products, new technologies, leisure and tourism, and financing. On a larger scale, corporations can design new robotics and develop other technologies to support both individual users, as well as healthcare and social service operators (termed "gerontechnology").

The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) recognizes the need to more vigorously address the population aging problem. The "Opinions on Developing the Silver Economy and Improving the Well-being of the Elderly", recently issued by the General Office of the State Council, China's Cabinet, reveals more details of this strategy. And a major policy of both the five-year plan and the State Council document is, indeed, to unleash the potential of the "silver economy".

In fact, China is well placed to realize the full potential of the "silver economy" for a number of reasons.

First, China does have a large and rap-

idly rising aging population, but the savings rates of senior citizens, in general, in China are comparatively high.

Second, because of the low fertility rate and relatively early marriage and childbearing, many older couples have become "empty-nesters" relatively early in their lives. This, coupled with the existing retirement age and longer life expectancy, means elderly people in China today have an extended consumption period.

Third, through what we call "cohort replacement", the elderly people in China will become more highly skilled, and healthier and wealthier with the passage of time and thus contribute to the economy, and boost the economy by con-

suming more.

Finally, as a significant industrialized economy, China can reap a "double dividend" from the "silver market" in which elderly people are consumers and the industry and service sectors producers. In fact, true intergenerational success can be achieved by engaging younger people in the "silver economy".

To ensure these initiatives succeed, however, it is crucial that goods and services are designed by or with the help of elderly people, but not necessarily for elderly people alone. This means recognizing that the end users have a better idea of what they need than, say, a 22-year-old graduate from any of China's colleges. For that, however, the design and testing process would need to be shifted out of the factories to communities. There is also a need to make regulations on quality a key part of the government's strategy, including ensuring people involved in scandals are prosecuted and punished according to law.

The "silver economy" can be a driver of economic growth, because it will open up new avenues of consumption. Yet it is important that the development of the "silver economy" is not only aimed at urban, high- and middle-income consumers. Instead, it should be inclusive, and serve as a means to improve the well-being of all older persons.

In other words, the "silver economy" should be developed in such a way that it serves a higher purpose, instead of simply boosting growth. The "silver economy" should be about enabling and empowering senior citizens, not only as consumers but also as senior members of society, as well as providing wider choices for all, regardless of their income level.

While the potential of the "silver economy" has been recognized in many parts of the world, China can break new ground by using the "silver economy" to improve the overall well-being of elderly people.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Wang Jinying

'Silver economy' can be a driver of China's growth

China's demographic landscape is undergoing a pivotal shift, thanks to the negative population growth and rapidly rising aging population. According to official data, China's population at the end of 2023 was 1.41 billion, a decrease of 2.08 million from 2022. And the elderly population, those aged 60 or above, reached 297 million, with those aged 65 or above totaling 217 million.

Estimates by the United Nations and Chinese scholars suggest that China's elderly population will continue to grow over the next 30 years, peaking after 2054, with the number of people aged 60 or above crossing the 500 million mark and those aged 65 or above exceeding 400 million. These demographic shifts will have a huge impact on China's socioeconomic development.

On Jan 15, the State Council issued the "Opinions on Developing the Silver Economy to Enhance the Well-being of the Elderly" which is a comprehensive study of China's current demographic reality and future trends, and a crucial guide to future development. The document specifically reflects the spirit of the 19th and 20th National Congresses of the Communist Party of China, calling for proactively addressing the population aging problem.

The document defines the "silver economy" as an economy that provides products or services

for the elderly. It covers a wide range of economic activities, from activities to meet the general needs of the elderly including food, clothing, housing, transportation and entertainment facilities to meet their requirements for healthcare and rehabilitation.

Given the substantial and growing demand of the elderly population, both in terms of quantity and quality, addressing these needs

will require continuous innovations and substantial investments. The "silver economy" is an integral part of the modern industrial system. Hence, as the elderly population continues to increase, the "silver economy", due to its further development, will become an even more crucial component of the modern industrial system.

The State Council outlines 26 specific measures across four key areas to promote the development of the "silver economy". And huge investments and innovative means will be needed to meet the elderly people's general needs of, among other things, food, clothing, traveling and cultural and recreational activities, and cater to their specific demands of innovative elderly products, smart healthcare, anti-aging products and advanced medical apps and the like.

In order to promote innovations, the authorities will need the help of sectors such as modern agriculture, high-tech manufacturing, research and experimental services, biopharmaceuticals, high-end medical technologies, high-tech products and services, as well as modern financial and cultural tourism services.

Promoting the high-quality development of the "silver economy" requires not only the implementation of the 26 measures outlined in the document but also the adherence to the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the CPC, developing a new development pattern, advancing industrialization, constructing a modern industrial system, transforming China into a top-quality manufacturing powerhouse, an aerospace hub, and a global leader in transportation, data and financial services.

The establishment of a modern industrial system is necessary to provide support for developing technologies, making innovative products, improving high-quality healthcare service, delivering quality public services, addressing the population aging problem, and meeting both the general and specific material and spiritual needs of the elderly. Only through the establishment of a modern industrial system can the measures outlined in the document, including increasing product supply and improving quality, be realized.

To adapt to the changes caused by the rapidly aging population, the authorities have to focus on meeting both the general and specific needs of the elderly, and transform the "silver economy" into a driver of the national economy. Optimizing the development environment, increasing the innovation capability, ensuring unhindered supply of resources, cultivating talents, strengthening financial support, improving product and service quality, and combating fraudulent activities are all essential components of the document.

Furthermore, genuine market forces should be allowed to play a decisive role in resource allocation, with the government taking care of planning and supervision. By building a modern industrial system, China can effectively promote the high-quality development of the "silver economy" and improve the well-being of the aging population.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Li Jia

Eldercare services a fast growing industry

As China charts its course toward high-quality development, developing the "silver economy" has emerged as a pivotal strategy to facilitate that process. Following the emphasis laid on the "silver economy" in key national meetings, the State Council, China's Cabinet, issued the "Opinions on Developing the Silver Economy to Enhance the Well-being of the Elderly" on Jan 15, making it the first dedicated document supporting the development of the "silver economy".

But what exactly is the "silver economy"? And how does it relate to concepts such as market-oriented elderly services, elderly service industry, eldercare industry, aging economy and "silver market"?

Depending on the timing, background, terminology and content of policy documents, the development of the concepts related to the "silver economy" can be divided into four stages.

Year 2000: Socialization and marketization of elderly services. At the end of 1999, the number of people aged 60 or above exceeded 10 percent of China's total population, marking the beginning of an aging population. The focus then was on addressing the pressing issues of inadequate and somewhat mediocre eldercare services. In August 2000, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the "Decision on Strengthening Aging Work", which encouraged social and market entities to participate in the eldercare industry, and promote the socialization and marketization of services for the elderly.

Year 2006: Eldercare services. In 2005, the number of people aged 65 or above exceeded 100 million, with more than 13 million of them aged 80 or above. The State Council's General Office released the "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Elderly Care Services" in February 2006, which for the first time mentioned the term "elderly care service industry". The document extended the focus beyond elderly care services to include products for elderly people, promoting the development of the market for products for the elderly.

Year 2012: Elderly care industry. As China's working-age population peaked at 940 million in 2012, the population aged 60 or above approached 200 million, constituting a significant percentage of the total population. In July 2012, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the "Implementation Opinions on Encouraging and Guiding Private Capital to Enter the Elderly Care Service Industry", mentioning the term "elderly care industry" for the first time and outlining eight main components of the industry.

Year 2020: Silver economy. The term "silver" refers to gray hair, often used as an elegant term for the elderly. In the 1970s, Japan coined the term "silver generation" to avoid the negative connotation of the word "old". At the turn of the century, Western countries, too, introduced terms such as "silver economy", "gray-hair economy", "longevity economy" and "silver market". In 2018, China witnessed a demographic turning point, with the elderly population surpassing the population aged 0-15. In October



The author is deputy head of the Aging Society Research Center at the Pangao Institution.

2020, the CPC Central Committee's report made addressing the population aging problem a national policy. And the Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035 marked the inception of the term "silver economy".

The ongoing journey from social services to economic advancement: Analyzing the policy evolution, it's evident that the above concepts, while closely related, are substantially different. The progression from social services to economic development reflects a better understanding of population aging, following a "social services-industry-economy" trajectory.

While socializing and marketizing eldercare services are aimed at addressing the basic needs of the elderly, the focus on the "silver economy" has extended to include diverse services such as healthcare, culture, and law, meeting the multifaceted needs of the elderly. This distinction highlights the difference between the concepts of "elderly" and "aging".

The "elderly care industry" and "anti-

aging industry" were instrumental in forming complete domestic production and supply chains, encouraging more market entities to provide mature, better and diverse products or services for the elderly. The "silver economy" has helped promote economic and social sustainability, and highlighted the impact of the changing demographics on various economic activities.

The recently issued "Opinions on Developing the Silver Economy to Enhance the Well-being of the Elderly" marks a groundbreaking shift, defining the "silver economy" as a holistic sum of economic activities to address the population aging problem and calling for making preparations to meet the needs of a larger aging population in the future. It covers a broad range, has substantial potential and calls for a more inclusive approach to development, beyond mere elderly services or the eldercare industry.

In conclusion, the comprehensive understanding of the silver economy's policy evolution will help local authorities and businesses to transcend the limitations of earlier concepts and develop a mature, advanced eldercare industry. By unleashing the full potential of the eldercare market and facilitating collaboration between dynamic markets and proactive governments, the State Council document can help accelerate the standardized, clustered and branded development of the "silver economy".

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

GLOBAL VIEWS



YIN YIYUAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

DARYL GUPPY

To be fit for purpose

WTO must bolster its multilateral credentials to become a bulwark for a healthy trade system

The World Trade Organization has come under relentless pressure to reform. The WTO's 13th Ministerial Conference in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, at the end of February is an opportunity to address the necessity of increasingly urgent reforms needed to counter the trend toward global trade protectionism.

Although there are variations in the reform suggestions, the proposals reflect two different understandings of the role the WTO should play in setting the environment for international trade.

The first approach supports the WTO but wants it to acknowledge the changes in global relationships to upgrade the significance of the Global South and the complexity of these economies. The proposals for this approach support a multilateral solution. They favor greater representation in the way decisions are made so that the WTO more accurately reflects the changing balance of economic activity. China is the champion of this multilateral approach which recognizes the significance of the Global South.

Established in 1995, the WTO and its decision-making structures have been dominated by the United States with effective veto power over critical appointments and processes. The US wanted to use its economic power to unilaterally shape the world in its own image. Despite this, the WTO was able to achieve a few significant changes, but there were rarely changes that disadvantaged the US.

Many in the US believed China's membership of the WTO would push China toward US-style capitalism and democracy. They have increasingly resented this decision as China's economy has gone from strength to strength without it becoming like the US. As their resentment grew, so too did the desire to blame the WTO.

The second approach, led by the US, harbors deep suspicions about the WTO because in recent years their unilateral dominance has been challenged. Starting with former president Donald Trump, the US has worked assiduously to undermine the authority and operation of the WTO.

This has included unilateral sanctions, illegal trade protection policies, tariffs and subsidies often under the spurious cover of national security. Even now, the Joe Biden administra-

Achieving consensus in the WTO is always a challenge and the Abu Dhabi meeting will be no different in this respect. However, the unity in the aspirations of the Global South, endorsed and supported by China, brings a new authority to the deliberations that recognizes the world has changed since 1995 and following the 2008 global financial crisis.

tion is considering further tariff hikes on electric vehicles, solar power equipment and less-advanced semiconductors, with a decision expected in the first half of this year. There is no indication of a change in policy no matter who wins the 2024 election.

The idea of reform in this US-led approach is to ensure the WTO remains an extension of US foreign policy. Already the US uses its veto power to disrupt the operation of the WTO, most notably by the four-year delay in confirming the appointment of the Appellate Body judges. This denies all WTO members their legal right to a binding, two-stage dispute settlement process which is a fundamental pillar of the WTO system.

An alternative trade dispute mechanism has been endorsed by China and Australia, and although effective, it is a stop-gap measure. However, this also provides a template for multilateral solutions. Although China and Australia come to the WTO from different perspectives, they both understand that it is no longer appropriate for WTO operations to be dominated by the US.

To be effective and relevant, the WTO must bolster its multilateral credentials to become a bulwark against any attempt to dominate WTO operations. Reform means the WTO must acknowledge the change in the balance of economic power both in terms of China and the eco-

nomics consolidation of the Global South.

China has led the initiative to broaden the multilateral foundations of the WTO. China has cited the need for specific actions to resolve crucial and urgent issues threatening the existence of the WTO, increased its relevance in global economic governance and improved the operational efficiency of the WTO.

These reforms have been recognized and endorsed by global business groups. The International Chamber of Commerce is urging trade ministers to reaffirm the common purpose of the WTO, to agree on a coherent and holistic vision for WTO reform based on the organization's founding principles, and to deliver on a work program for WTO reform covering negotiations, dispute resolution, and monitoring and deliberative functions.

The US wants to change the way that the more than two-thirds of WTO members are designated as developing countries, or which are classified as least developed countries, in line with United Nations criteria.

A group of 13 members called for the WTO's negotiating function to be reinvigorated, citing the need to safeguard and strengthen the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism as a central pillar of the WTO. Some countries have called for updating WTO rules to reflect the 21st century realities that require flexible and open negotiating approaches delivering multilateral outcomes.

Achieving consensus in the WTO is always a challenge and the Abu Dhabi meeting will be no different in this respect. However, the unity in the aspirations of the Global South, endorsed and supported by China, brings a new authority to the deliberations that recognizes the world has changed since 1995 and following the 2008 global financial crisis.

Reform of the WTO is a necessity and China is supporting its reinvigoration for an open and multilateral trading environment fit for purpose in the 21st century.

The author is an international financial technical analysis expert and a former national board member of the Australia China Business Council. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

CHEN ZHAOYUAN

Trade lubrication

Consensus on action to reform the WTO would make the 13th ministerial conference of great significance

Trade remains a key component of solutions to many global challenges. Therefore, there is an urgent need to reform the World Trade Organization in order to better leverage the role of the multilateral trading system. The WTO's forthcoming 13th ministerial conference to be held in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, from Feb 26 to 29, will provide an important opportunity for all parties involved to reach consensus on reform issues. Since the 12th ministerial conference achieved multiple historic breakthroughs and vowed to carry out necessary reforms to the WTO, implementing the momentum of reforms into action has become a top priority.

The first thing that needs to be clarified is that the basis for reform is to maintain, rather than weaken, the authority and effectiveness of the WTO-centered multilateral trading regime. On this basis, inclusivity and transparency are the cornerstones of the reform process, which not only concern the reform's procedures and methods, but also affect its content and results.

The principle of inclusiveness emphasizes the need to ensure that all members, regardless of their size and strength, have a voice and influence in the reform process. The reform should not let a few members hold the final say, nor form discriminatory cliques. Special attention should be given to the needs and challenges of the developing countries, especially the least developed ones, with the intent of helping them enjoy more equitable opportunities for growth while integrating into economic globalization. The principle of inclusiveness means that reform should continue to place the development agenda at the core of the WTO's work, safeguard the development interests and policy space of developing members, and promote the balanced growth of the world economy.

Transparency should be another key principle of WTO reform, which requires transparency in the negotiation, decision-making and implementation of reform outcomes. Greater transparency will help enhance the participation and trust of member states in the WTO reform process, thereby boosting their sense of identification with the outcomes. In addition, the principle exerts pressure on the protectionist and double-standard behavior of certain countries, and in particular on the United States to stop undermining international trade rules and the multilateral trading system.

Attention also needs to be paid to

urgent and mature reform priorities. On the one hand, urgent matters that endanger the normal operation of the WTO need to be prioritized, and currently, it refers to restoring the functioning of the WTO Appellate Body. The dispute settlement mechanism and its two-level trial system are important guarantees for the effective implementation of multilateral trade rules. The obstruction by the United States is the main reason for the deadlock in the Appellate Body. The US disregarded the opinions of the vast majority of WTO members and vetoed the proposal to initiate the Appellate Body member selection process for the 69th time at a meeting of the WTO's Dispute Settlement Body in October 2023. James Bacchus, former chairman of the Appellate Body, recently pointed out in an article that the hypocrisy of the Biden administration is most evident in WTO dispute settlement, and the US' accusations of the Appellate Body's lack of restraint are unfounded. On the contrary, the US has not restrained itself in applying unilateral and discriminatory trade measures. WTO reform should resolve the issue of the suspension of the Appellate Body at the soonest, promote the establishment of a comprehensive and well functioning dispute resolution system that all members can use, and put unilateralism and protectionist practices that violate WTO rules in the cage of the system.

On the other hand, the 13th WTO ministerial conference should be taken as an opportunity to implement the mature issues in the early negotiations into practical results, such as the second round of fishery subsidy negotiations, agriculture and food security, integration of small economies into the world trade system, plastic pollution, and e-commerce, etc. These fields represent different aspects of the global trade ecosystem and demonstrate the WTO's vitality in keeping up with the times. The related achievements also show the WTO's commitment to sustainable development and its ability to adjust regulatory frameworks to meet the trade needs in today's era, which will enhance the international community's confidence in WTO reform.

Innovative and pragmatic reform pathways must be adopted. Under the consensus rule, the effectiveness of the WTO is weakened, but if the consensus rule is abandoned, it may be difficult to prevent WTO reform from being dominated by major powers. An innovative and pragmatic solution to overcome this dilemma is to use the

Joint Statement Initiative to realize multilateral outcomes through plurilateral agreements. The Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement is a recent noteworthy case. It has received support from over two-thirds of the WTO members and is the first major issue initiated and led by China and related developing members in the WTO. It is expected to further achieve practical results at the 13th ministerial conference. Furthermore, in the field of digital trade, 90 WTO members, including China, the US and Europe, substantially concluded negotiations on some global digital trade rules in December 2023. These members account for more than 90 percent of the global digital trade, and the Joint Statement Initiative on E-Commerce has become the core platform for formulating high standard digital trade rules.

Another innovative and pragmatic reform pathway is to consolidate the WTO's deliberative function. Alongside negotiation and dispute resolution, trade policy review is one of the major functions of the WTO. Strengthening the deliberative function would provide WTO members with a space to discuss both emerging and longstanding trade issues, promote policy analysis and consensus building. Given the important role of deliberation in ensuring transparency in trade policies among WTO members and monitoring their compliance with WTO rules and commitments, trade frictions can also be avoided or resolved through the deliberative functions of various WTO committees and their subsidiaries in the future.

With unilateralism and protectionism on the rise, some economic and trade issues have shown a trend of politicization, weaponization and securitization, and the multilateral trading system has been severely shocked in recent years. It is imperative to reform the WTO to ensure the smooth running of the global trade system. With the convening of the 13th ministerial conference, China, as a responsible developing country, should continue to be a staunch supporter of multilateralism and global governance, contributing wisdom and strength to achieving substantive progress of the WTO reform.

The author is an assistant researcher with the Institute of World Economics and Politics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

LIFE

Tourism's technological transformation

Digitalization and corresponding innovations are enticing reimaginings of travel that are increasingly translating into reality, **Yang Feiyue** reports.

As digital technology has restructured social production methods, ways of thinking and modes of communication, culture and art are increasingly manifesting in digital forms. Pioneers and experts in the fields of digital technology applications, art, culture and tourism gathered at the 21st China Forum on International Cultural Industries in Beijing in early January to share experiences and explore opportunities to promote the in-depth integration of related sectors, with travel as a major focal point.

The forum was hosted by Peking University under the theme of developing a strong socialist culture and a modern Chinese civilization.

In Langfang, Hebei province, digital innovations have been intertwined with traditional Chinese culture at the Unique Dream of Red Mansion, a theme park based on the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which recounts aspects of ancient China, such as its social life and customs. Yu Feng, general manager of the park's operation company, told the forum.

The company has developed the digital travel platform, Xiaowa. "It can seamlessly accompany travelers throughout their visits," Yu says.

Before a trip, Xiaowa acts as a travel planner and creates intelligent itineraries. During the trip, Xiaowa provides real-time insights and smart recommendations.

"Every visitor can get a personalized schedule and conduct their activities accordingly," Yu says.

For example, once the schedule is confirmed, visitors can compare it with the current conditions, including continuously updated information about lines for various performances at the Unique Dream of Red Mansion park. That's not to mention dining, shopping and special events.

"Throughout the entire visit, our mini program features a powerful set of functions, including live broadcasts, ticket reservations and, more importantly, interactive functions like navigation," Yu says, adding that a massive data platform supports these capabilities.

This is related to the scheduling system that not only integrates with the front-end display but also provides a clear layout for back-end tasks related to personnel situations like work shifts and duties, emergencies and related adjustments.

The application enables visitors to better immerse themselves in traditional Chinese culture at the park and has helped to draw in many patrons since it launched in July. More than 10,000 travelers flocked to the attraction on New Year's Eve.

Virtual visits

Qiu Wenzhong, director of the administration of Yuanmingyuan, or the Old Summer Palace, says the Qing Dynasty emperors' seasonal resort has been undergoing digitalization since 2009.

"In the digital age, due to reasons such as distance, time constraints and other factors... digitization provides us with an excellent supplement and a great alternative," Qiu says. But he says he believes real-life immersion still provides the best experience.

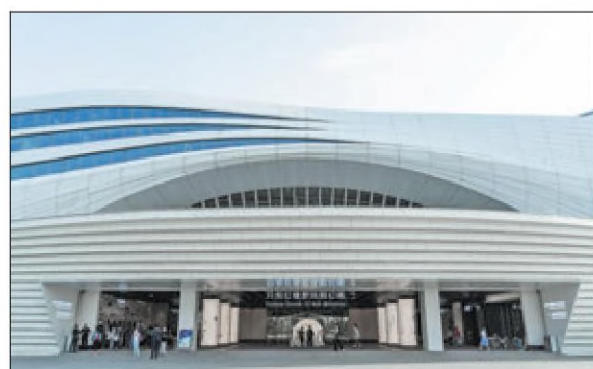
"We scanned the site, studied various relics and combined historical documents, samples and Qing Dynasty engineering practices to digitally restore a large number of buildings," Qiu recalls.

"It is precisely because of this extensive foundational and cultural



Unique Dream of Red Mansion, a theme park based on the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in Langfang in Hebei province, integrates traditional Chinese culture with digital technology to create an innovative experience for visitors.

PHOTOS BY FENG JUN FOR AND PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



“In the digital age, embracing new technologies to create new cultural and tourism (experiences) ... is inevitable.”

Qiu Wenzhong, director of the administration, Yuanmingyuan

research that Yuanmingyuan now has rich cultural content. Based on this research foundation, we have developed cultural and creative digital products and re-creations of certain scenes."

The park now offers a 720-degree "time-travel" experience, which takes travelers back to the historical glory of Yuanmingyuan through digital technology. Visitors can witness the past and present of Yuanmingyuan, which is presented not only in its entirety, including its former architectural appearance, but also through interesting anecdotes and re-enactments of past scenes. The goal is to ensure the experiential project is not just about observation but truly immerses visitors so that they feel like active participants.

Such tech-powered operations have enhanced traveler experience at Yuanmingyuan.

The time-travel experience has produced great results, Qiu says. Over 1,000 people — about 80 percent of its capacity — visited per day on most days during last year's school summer vacation period, he says.

"The market is the best touchstone," Qiu says.

"The ultimate success of our projects lies in how well they are presented and ultimately contribute to cultural communication."

Yuanmingyuan is also planning to run a mixed-reality electric tour bus. "In the digital age, embracing new technologies to create new cultural and tourism (experiences) ... is inevitable," Qiu says.

Tang Jinnan, Peking University's School of Journalism and Communication's Party secretary, says that this is an era of convergence and transformation, and it's crucial to reconfigure and stabilize existing structures.

Tang says he regards successful innovative cultural and tourism

experiences, including Unique Dream of Red Mansion, as endeavors to present past traditions through new technologies.

"Whether it was drawing by hand in the past, using a computer now or incorporating artificial intelligence, the essence remains unchanged. Therefore, the logic of how we empower these cultural elements has not changed," Tang says.

"We have already explored some aspects in this regard. And when artificial intelligence truly pays large-scale and significant dividends, new successes will undoubtedly emerge in China."

Central Academy of Fine Arts' School of Design professor Fei Jun highlights technology's role in content creation. He believes AI's full extended perception capabilities are yet to be fully unlocked.

Fei has been working with a mathematician and a psychologist over the past four years to create an "emotional geometry" series.

"We visualize human emotions through a combination of mathematics, psychology and an empathetic artistic approach," he says.

Through internet technology, the emotional geometry has been translated into "emotional cuisine" served in a bar. "When a visitor places their hands on the bar, we collect data about their heart rates to display their current emotional state on a screen in front of them," Fei says.

Then a robotic arm to the left of the screen mixes a beverage or cocktail tailored to their respective emotional state. Additionally, a seven-course banquet was developed, with each dish customized according to the emotions of each diner.

"We've integrated art, dining and mixed-reality experiences to create an immersive culinary journey that not only provides a contextualized dining experience but also serves as a multisensory and artistic therapeutic encounter," Fei says.

In December, Fei and his team established an "emotional theater" at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing.

"The audience uses the interactive devices we provide to experience performances featuring music and visuals generated specifically according to their emotions," Fei says.

Fei believes these projects may offer practical approaches for exploring the collaborative relationship between human and machine creators.

"We can see that AI serves as a provider of materials used by human creators. In this role, AI is more like a sous chef preparing ingredients, while human creators act as the head chefs, using the materials provided by the sous chefs for the creative process," Fei says.

Xiang Yong, Peking University's Institute for Cultural Industries head, says all parties need to continually unleash cultural development's vitality through institutional innovation and showcase the character of the human-oriented economy.

This involves promoting the digital transformation of cultural production, empowering cultural creativity for rural vitalization and urban renewal, achieving cross-disciplinary innovation and industrial integration in cultural creativity, and making cultural inheritance and development a strategic focus for value creation.

Contact the writer at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn

What's on

Classical appeal



Compilation of Classics in the Flourishing Age, an exhibition at the China Millennium Monument, is dedicated to an ambitious cultural chronicle that began in 2005. Zhejiang University in Hangzhou reached out to museums and institutions at

home and abroad with collections of fine classical Chinese paintings to gather information and seek licensed images. Their hard work resulted in *A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings*, a 60-volume encyclopedic collection that catalogs over 12,400 classical pieces. These paintings on paper, silk or linen are housed in 263 museums, galleries or other institutions. The exhibition traces the book's long path from origin to completion, showing prints and digital images of the featured paintings in an immersive environment that resembles ancient studios. The exhibition ends on May 5. 9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 9A Fuxing Lu, Haidian district, Beijing. 010-8418-7900.

Cultural crossroad

Selected works from the 7th China Image Contest are on show at the National Museum of China in the exhibition, *Jointly Building the Belt and Road, Looking for a Brighter Future*. It provides a panoramic



view of the changes over the past decade since the Belt and Road Initiative was put forward. The contest received 20,000 submissions, and 121 images were given awards. The photos present the diverse landscapes of the countries taking part in the BRI, large construction projects to strengthen connectivity among countries involved in the initiative, and the diversity of cultures and customs. The exhibition also shows that the deepening exchange of products and technologies has benefited people in many nations. The exhibition runs through March 20. 9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 16 East Chang'an Avenue, Dongcheng district, Beijing. 010-6511-6400.

Everyday heroes

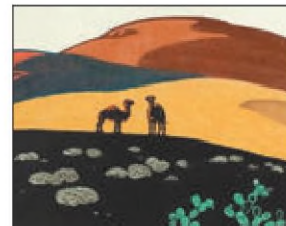


Hailing the national heroes and models endeavoring at the grassroots is the theme of the latest exhibition at the China National Academy of

Painting, lasting till Feb 17. In recent years, the academy has arranged for its resident artists to portray people who have contributed to national development in their respective areas, such as Zhang Guimei, the principal of a free public high school for girls in rural Yunnan province. On show are classical Chinese and oil paintings, calligraphy scrolls, prints and sculptures that profile these ordinary heroes from different backgrounds, whose work has changed other people's lives. 9-11:30 am, 1:30-4:30 pm, daily. 54 Xisanhuan Bei Lu, Haidian district, Beijing. 010-6841-2606.

The good earth

Land, earth, soil — this umbrella concept is a recurring motif through which artists convey an emotional attachment to, and thoughts on, the relationships people share with their environments. The Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts' exhibition, *Cultivating the Earth*, brings togeth-



er prints by its professors which are on show through to March 3. In their work, the land and soil are more than the ground on which magnificent landscapes are set. Also, these artists revisit the motif as a symbol of the spirit that prompts humans to create civilizations. They also reflect on how human activities change nature, such as by examining the pros and cons of urbanization and its influence on city dwellers' mentalities. 9:30 am-5:30 pm, closed on Mondays. 8 Huajiaji Nan Jie, Wangjing, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-6477-1575.

LIFE



From left: Fan Rongnan (middle) measures the length of a petroglyph with his colleagues on a mountain in Alshaa Right Banner, the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, which hosts rich rock art troves dating back to the Neolithic period, in 2006; with no road connections to most cultural heritage sites, fieldwork researchers, like Fan, have to climb the mountains and live in the wilderness; Fan takes a photo of a rock painting on a cliff in 2007. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Writing on the wall

The art carved into the cliffs and boulders of the Mandela Mountains and surrounding areas tell human stories set in stone, **Wang Qian** and **Yuan Hui** report in Hohhot.

Fan Rongnan was astonished when he first stumbled upon rocks with paintings and carvings depicting nomadic life in the rugged and remote Mandela Mountains in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region in 1985. "It felt like entering a gallery in the wilderness. There are images of oxen, horses, goats, deer, snakes, eagles and turtles, stationary and moving, standing and lying," says the 60-year-old researcher of the Alshaa Right Banner Cultural Heritage Protection Center.

Fan didn't know exactly what he was looking at but did immediately realize they were treasures that could provide new clues to ancient mysteries.

According to researcher Ge Shanlin, these "living fossils of the origins of art" were produced from the Neolithic period to the 19th century, creating a record of the area's material and symbolic culture.

Over 7,000 ancient images cover rocks strewn across an 18-square-kilometer area. They continue to mystify scholars.

They vary in motif and include abstract symbols, human faces, animals, and scenes of hunting and herding.

Ge explains that Inner Mongolia's rock-art sites are the richest such troves near the country's northern border.

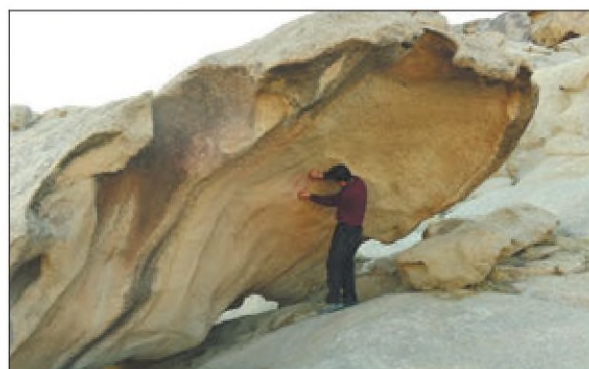
"Because the study of rock art was still nascent in China in the 1980s, it was not until 1987, when we sent the stones to Ge at the Inner Mongolia Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, that we knew they were categorized as petroglyphs," Fan says.

He adds that these discoveries were followed by vandalism and theft.

So the first thing Fan did when he was promoted as the head of the Alshaa Right Banner Cultural Heritage Protection Center in 2000 was launch a comprehensive investigation of the site, where these carvings are engraved on cliffs and boulders.

The survey revealed the rock art had survived thousands of years of weathering by wind and rain but was at risk of vanishing in the near future if left unprotected.

About 2,000 petroglyphs were



Above: A petroglyph found in 2000 showing a matriarchal village of 18 tents and their inhabitants, with the tallest figure being that of a woman.

Left: A hunting scene involving ibexes and wild sheep.

Below left: Fan Rongnan measures an ancient painted outline of a human hand.

Below: Petroglyph of a figure riding a horse and hunting wild sheep.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



It's our duty to protect it so that more people can appreciate their beauty and value, and share China's rock art with the world."

Fan Rongnan, researcher of the Alshaa Right Banner Cultural Heritage Protection Center

damaged or stolen between their initial discovery in 1985 and the early 2000s, Fan says.

He established a temporary protection station with two staffers and checkpoints at the main entrance.

The site received official protection from the autonomous region's government in 2003, when Fan took a team of six to survey the Mandela Mountains' petroglyphs.

Every day from April to September that year, team members carried 15-kilogram packs as they marked and photographed each example.

They made records of 4,234 petroglyphs, including 4,800 photos, 260 replicas and over 50 rubbings, and used these records to produce an atlas of the site later that year.

During the survey, the paintings were fenced in, and a tourist trail was paved.

Wang Xiaoli, from the Alshaa League Museum, says this kind of art plays an important role in understanding the prehistoric interactions between the Chinese and their nomadic and pastoral neighbor.

The older generation of scholars, like Ge, believe that some petroglyphs from Inner Mongolia are representations of sun deities. Although the secrets behind these ancient depictions are still waiting to be deciphered, they create a picture of the rich tapestry of human history.

Located between the Badain Jaran and the Tengger deserts, the Mandela Mountains have steep and rugged cliffs, and their black basalt provides a natural canvas for rock art, according to Wang.

It also means danger for field-

work researchers like Fan, who spends more than eight months a year on the road.

"During these trips, I have had two car accidents and fallen off cliffs three times," Fan says.

He adds that they often get lost, especially during sandstorms, and that the phone signal is weak in the Gobi Desert.

"As most cultural heritage sites can't be reached by road, the movement of facilities and people is challenging. We have to climb the mountains and live in the wilderness," Fan says.

In 2006, Fan's car overturned while he was driving through the Badain Jaran Desert, and an injured colleague had to be sent to the hospital. After taking care of his colleague for three days, Fan finally had time to take a shower.

"When I took off my trousers, I found that my whole leg was green and swollen. I went to the doctor who said I was badly hurt and that, without treatment, my leg might have required amputation," Fan remembers.

He'd also been injured the summer of the previous year when he broke his sternum after falling down a cliff while trying to photograph some of the petroglyphs.

In addition to the Mandela Mountains, Fan has surveyed most corners of the 73,000-square-kilometer Alshaa Right Banner and has registered 567 immovable cultural relics sites, including 81 rock art sites.

In 2010, an international seminar on the rock art site in the Mandela Mountains was held in the Alshaa Right Banner to strengthen communication with overseas scholars.

Now, Fan is setting up a digital archive to support rock art conservation. It consists of information, such as the locations, dates, sizes and 3D images of more than 30,000 petroglyphs.

"Rock art is a treasure that can be shared by all human beings," he says.

"It's our duty to protect it so that more people can appreciate their beauty and value, and share China's rock art with the world."

Contact the writers at wangqian@chinadaily.com.cn

Increasing number of young people savor beauty of dance dramas

XI'AN — For Lyu Hang, an avid fan of theater performances, attending as many as 10 dance dramas with diverse themes during the past year satisfied her both emotionally and spiritually.

"These dramas not only captivate the audience but also introduce innovative ways of blending cultures and arts across time and space for laypeople like me," says the 32-year-old theater enthusiast who is a frequent visitor to the Shaanxi Opera House in the city of Xi'an in Northwest China.

Chinese dance dramas have garnered high acclaim from youngsters for their diverse themes, spanning human relations with nature, iconic literati and historical novels, and artistic practices from both the East and the West.

According to a report from the

China Association of Performing Arts, people aged 18 to 34 were the predominant segment of the consumer base in the performing arts market in 2022, accounting for over 76 percent of the audience.

For instance, the dance drama *Crested Ibises*, named after the bird species with a red crest and long black beak, tells the story of how people strive to maintain a harmonious coexistence with nature during the processes of urbanization and industrialization.

The crested ibis was thought to be extinct in China until seven wild birds were spotted in Yangxian county in Shaanxi in 1981. After more than 40 years of protection efforts, its global population now exceeds 10,000.

The drama visualizes the natural movements of the species and dem-



The dance drama *Crested Ibises* visualizes the natural movements of the species that was thought to be extinct in China, in the Shaanxi Opera House in Xi'an in May last year. XINHUA

onstrates the common environmental crises faced by the whole world through vivid stagecraft.

"The exquisite combination of Chinese folk dance and Western ballet makes it a true masterpiece," says Dai Ping, a professor at the Shanghai Theater Academy.

According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in the first three quarters of 2023, about 342,000 commercial performances were staged in China, which attracted over 110 million viewers, up 121 percent and 188.5 percent, respectively, from the same period in 2019.

Lyu says that the most impressive drama she saw in 2023 was *Poetic Dance: Dongpo*, which she believes is a good example of cultural fusion. The performance depicts the life of Su Shi, a poet and cultural icon from

the Song Dynasty (960-1279), through 15 of his most recognized poems.

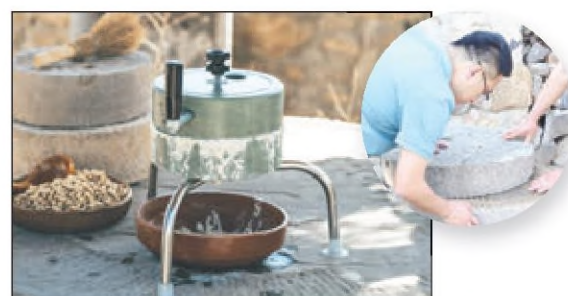
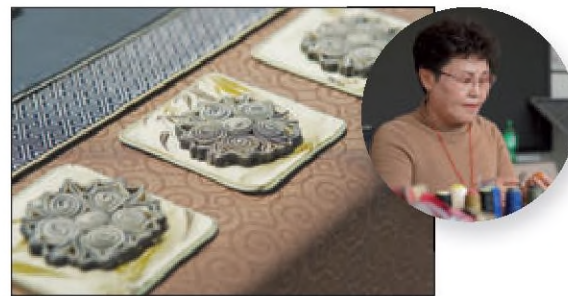
"I once asked my French friends their impressions of the drama. They told me that they could sense the characters' emotions and thoughts conveyed through body movements, even without translation," says Shen Wei, who directed the poetic dance.

In recent years, several Chinese dance dramas, including *Confucius* and *Mulan*, hit international stages in the United States, Mexico and many other countries.

"Art has no boundaries. I hope that audiences from different cultural backgrounds can feel the shared pursuit of human beings through dance dramas," Shen says.

XINHUA

CULTURE



Clockwise from left: Liu Dongmei's award-winning button designs are showcased on a Chinese dress, as they have been on the clothing of many luminaries from both the public and private sector. Examples of the work of ceramic artist Ma Chibin are on display at his workshop in early September. PHOTOS BY WANG HAORAN / CHINA DAILY A millstone is shaped with a chisel. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Above: Master artisan Liu Dongmei's traditional Chinese knotted button designs incorporate innovative trends; Work by ceramic artist Ma Chibin is on display at his workshop in early September. PHOTOS BY WANG HAORAN / CHINA DAILY; Work by millstone craftsman Zhao Hongxiang. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Keeping tradition alive

Inheritors of intangible cultural heritage help ensure their art not only survives but thrives, **Alexis Hooi** and **Wang Haoran** report in Rizhao, Shandong.

Liu Dongmei crafts intricate *pankou*, or traditional Chinese knotted buttons commonly used on *qipao* dresses. Ask the master artisan about the main factor behind her elaborate designs and the answer is surprisingly simple.

"First and foremost, you must have the passion for making them," she said.

Liu, 62, is a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage artisan in Wulian county of Rizhao, East China's Shandong province. Her award-winning *pankou* designs have adorned the dresses of luminaries in the public and private sector, appeared in national and other major ceremonies and events, and even emerged in modern, creative cultural items such as handbags and other fashion accessories.

The earliest written records of Chinese knot buttons can be traced to the Zhou Dynasty (c.11th century—256 BC).

Pankou artisans usually fashion thin strips of cloth before twisting them meticulously into different shapes and affixing them to the collars of the quintessential Chinese dresses. A traditional *pankou*

combines an embossment with a circular piece of material, which are looped like a buckle to "tie" the button.

"I also conduct regular classes and training sessions for children and young women," Liu said.

She has been involved in about 1,600 *pankou*-making classes for students and conducted free training sessions for at least 660 women from local villages, as well as helped provide job opportunities related to the craft for more than 80 people.

"We must keep this Chinese tradition alive and constantly innovate to help it thrive," Liu said.

To that effect, Rizhao is exploring innovative ways to preserve and develop its traditional cultural handicrafts to boost its cultural industry, with the city government also rolling out more measures to support the preservation of traditional handicrafts and promote them, such as by setting up handicraft industrial parks, hand-made experience halls, as well as intangible cultural heritage workshops.

The workshops have become major venues for promoting handicraft culture, according to local authorities. Training courses have

“
We must keep this Chinese tradition alive and constantly innovate to help it thrive.”
Liu Dongmei, a master artisan

also been held to help traditional handicrafts inheritors discover new trends from old arts and attract intangible cultural heritage enthusiasts.

The provincial government has issued a plan to promote Shandong's resources along culturally and historically significant areas, such as those of the Yellow River, the Grand Canal, the Great Wall of Qi, and the Bohai and Yellow seas. As a major coastal city of the Shandong Peninsula, Rizhao will also focus on promoting the handicraft industry by integrating seaside tourism, according to authorities.

Wulian county alone now boasts more than 70 major listings of intangible cultural heritage.

Other local inheritors of intangible cultural heritage include ceramic artist Ma Chibin.

Ma, 42, has won many awards and accolades with his lifelike folk

figurines, mythological creatures, iconic landscapes and sturdy vessels. His ceramic murals also adorn the halls of several museums across the country.

"When I was a child, there were many kiln factories around the village and I would play around them, especially since they were warm and comfortable in the colder months," Ma said. "Ceramic culture influenced me very much."

Personal links

In 2007, Ma returned to his hometown in Wulian after studying, training and working throughout the province and Beijing.

Ma said the high-quality clay he uses for his artworks are still drawn from the county, with its distinctive touch, feel and texture traced back to ancient times, helping him to maintain his links with the land and preserve its heritage

in a personal way.

When asked about the inspiration behind the adorable, addictive grins of his popular series of child musician sculptures, the artist said their positive mood is exactly how he feels.

"I'm very happy when I'm creating these works, so perhaps they reflect that," said Ma, who also conducts classes in the community to pass on the traditions of his art.

"As a ceramist, it is important to play with and feel a handful of clay ... I want to pass on the craft and allow more people to better understand this intangible cultural heritage of ours."

For Zhao Hongxiang, being the seventh generation master craftsman of millstones in the area means a major responsibility to not just pass down the intangible cultural heritage, but also to come up with new ways of keeping it practical and useful.

"Our innovations include smaller sized, customized millstones that can fit on common kitchen counters," said Zhao, 35.

"Elderly family members who live with their children and grandchildren in apartments can still enjoy grinding grains for their breakfast

and other meals, which many people believe are still more healthy than processed foods," he said.

Zhao said he hopes to educate more people from home and abroad about the millstones and share his personal connections with the object.

He is setting up a museum dedicated to the history and development of Chinese millstones, with a comprehensive array of ancient and contemporary exhibits to be located right next to his workshop.

Interactive displays incorporating multimedia technology will allow visitors young and old to come up close with an important aspect of Chinese agricultural development and civilization, he said.

Zhao added that, in line with preserving and promoting their beauty and purpose, the surface grooves of his millstones must still be painstakingly carved out by hand.

"Creating the grooves in specially selected local, hardy stone lies at the heart of every millstone and that remains an integral part of our tradition and heritage," he said.

Contact the writers at alexishooi@chinadaily.com.cn

World invited to savor tea brewed by Yao people

By **ZHANG LI**
 in Guilin, Guangxi
 zhangli@chinadaily.com.cn

As a child, Zhou Liwei, a member of the Yao ethnic group, would wake up early in the morning, not to the alarm clock ringing or his parents' calls.

Instead, the regular pounding of tea leaves with a pot and wooden hammer, often accompanied by the singing of folk songs, would herald the start of the day.

"Pounding the leaves to make our traditional 'oil tea' remains part of our daily life," he said.

Zhou, 47, is a national-level inheritor of intangible cultural heritage linked to the unique tea of his ethnic group in Gongcheng Yao autonomous county of Guilin, South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

He is also head of the local association for the traditional beverage, which can be traced to ancient medicinal drinks to help counter the humidity and other challenging

aspects of the local climate. Known popularly as "oil tea", the drink is a unique Yao dietary custom, an integral part of ceremonies, rituals, celebrations and festivals.

Repeatedly pounding and boiling the fresh tea leaves, with generous portions of ginger, a sprinkling of roasted rice, nuts and other local ingredients, can aid digestion, strengthen the stomach and even help prevent malaria, among numerous other health benefits, Zhou said.

Late last year, the oil tea of the Yao ethnic group was included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as part of traditional tea processing techniques and associated social practices in China.

"China's traditional tea processing techniques and associated social practices entail the knowledge, skills and practices around tea plantation management, tea-leaf picking, manual processing, drinking and sharing," according

to the UNESCO citation.

"Tea is ubiquitous in the Chinese people's daily life ... The practice of greeting guests and building relationships within families and among neighbors through tea-related activities is common to multiple ethnic groups, providing a sense of shared identity and continuity for the communities," it said.

Zhou himself runs a business that helps to preserve the Yao tea tradition and promote it at home and abroad.

"We can churn out up to 10 tons of fresh oil tea products a day," he said, adding that latest efforts to ride modern consumer trends, especially among the young, include bottled, ready-to-drink products and instant mixes.

"We also try to increase our presence beyond the tea's traditional home, taking part in exhibitions, exchanges and related events, to promote its benefits to more people," Zhou said.

"We're looking at having shops in

“
Oil tea is part of our rich heritage and we want everyone to appreciate and enjoy it like us.”
Zhou Liwei, a national-level inheritor of intangible cultural heritage for Yao oil tea

major cities like Beijing and Shenzhen, so that consumers can taste the tea for themselves and learn about its benefits."

Potential for the tea abroad includes markets in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, with export and halal dietary certifications for consumers there already in place, Zhou said.

"Oil tea is part of our rich heritage and we want everyone to appreciate and enjoy it like us," he said.



Top: Elderly members of the Yao ethnic group enjoy oil tea in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. **Above:** Other members of the community prepare tea for visitors. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY