



An ice reason

People from Taiwan visit Chinese mainland to enjoy winter tourism **TREND, PAGE 8**



Creative appeal

Artists find inspiration in China's porcelain capital **PEOPLE, PAGE 5**

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Experts: Rate cuts hold key to recovery

Nation's central bank says new yuan loans reach all-time high in January

By ZHOU LANXU
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China needs further monetary accommodation to reinforce the recent signs of a recovery in demand, with more interest rate cuts needed in order to ease corporate financing burdens and household mortgage costs, political advisers and experts said.

They commented after a faster-than-expected credit expansion signaled a nascent recovery in the nation's financing demand. Both China's new yuan loans and total financing to the real economy in January hit all-time highs of 4.92 trillion yuan (\$683.9 billion) and 6.5 trillion yuan respectively, according to the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank.

However, other indicators showed a lingering weakness in demand. The growth in the consumer price index, a main gauge of inflation, stood at -0.8 percent year-on-year in January, staying in negative territory for four consecutive months — the first time since 2009, the National Bureau of Statistics said.

The manufacturing sector contracted for the fourth month in a row as the sector's official purchasing managers index came in at 49.2 in January, below the 50-mark that separates expansion from contraction, the NBS said.

Ming Ming, chief economist at CITIC Securities, said the mixed fig-

ures show that the foundation for economic recovery remains unstable. "There is no basis for monetary policy to shift toward tightening."

Zhang Bin, a senior researcher at the China Finance 40 Forum think tank and a member of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the country's top political advisory body, said insufficient demand remains the top challenge facing the Chinese economy.

To boost financing demand, Zhang said it is necessary to significantly reduce policy benchmark rates to bring down real interest rates.

Data from the PBOC shows that China's weighted average interest rate of new corporate loans hit a new low of 3.75 percent in December.

"It's essential to amplify policy support for the capital market and consumer spending, and interest rate cuts should be considered as an important tool," said Gong Liutang, a professor of applied economics at Peking University's Guanghua School of Management and a member of the 14th CPPCC National Committee.

"Household income growth is anaemic while the wealth effect — whereby consumers spend more when the value of their assets like houses or stocks goes up — is diminishing. These have combined to weigh on consumption and the broader economy."

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OPEN-AIR MARKETS BOLSTER BEIJING'S STREET VENDING ECONOMY

Sellers get a fair chance to do brisk business as the lively atmosphere draws shoppers young and old

By CUI JIA
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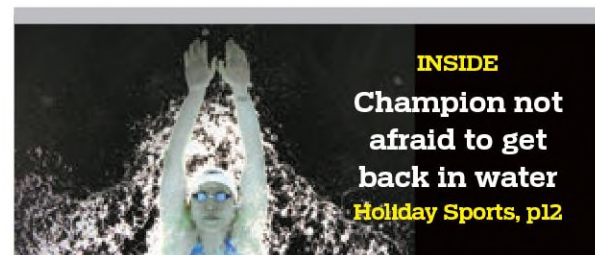
Guo Liping, 50, has been regularly visiting the Shahe Market in Beijing's Changping district for a decade. He said he is a big fan of the vibrant open-air market because it helps him unwind and stay passionate about life.

The market is so popular among both Changping's residents and visitors from other districts that shoppers jostle for elbowroom on normal days, and now with the Year of the Dragon here, the crowds are swelling as more vendors have set up shop to sell Spring Festival decorations such as lanterns, couplets and red envelopes, Guo said.

"Shahe Market is the place to be if one wants to get into the festive mood. Look how happy people are when choosing Spring Festival decorations. See how their faces light up when they land a good deal. Simple pleasures don't cost much here," he said, in between bites of his hot sesame bun with sausages.

As delicious smells wafted up from the food stalls on a cold winter morning, Guo, who works in the finance sector, said: "For many people like me, coming to the market is therapeutic, and I am not exaggerating a bit. As soon as I walk into the market, I feel very relaxed. It's totally worth the one-hour drive."

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Festive offering



A man in Zaozhuang, Shandong province, receives a red envelope from a performer dressed as the God of Fortune on Wednesday, the fifth day of the first lunar month, which signifies the arrival of a new and better life. SUN ZHONGZHE / FOR CHINA DAILY

CCTV gala's branch venues prove hit with tourists

By YAN DONGJIE
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China's annual Spring Festival TV gala has sparked a flurry of interest in travel to the four cities featured as branch venues during the extravaganza.

On Friday, Lunar New Year's Eve, the cities of Shenyang in Liaoning province, Changsha in Hunan province, Xi'an in Shaanxi province, and Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, along with the main venue in Beijing, held a cross-city interactive Spring Festival Gala, live on China Central Television.

Data from Tongcheng Travel showed that from Friday night to Saturday, searches for the branch venues of the gala all increased significantly, with the biggest winners being Xi'an at 294 percent and Kashgar rising at 270 percent.

Last year, Kashgar received over 33.22 million visitors, generating

tourism revenue exceeding 27.3 billion yuan (\$3.80 billion). This year, the goal for Kashgar's tourism sector is to receive 40 million visitors and achieve revenue of 34 billion yuan.

Spring Festival is the most important festival in China, a time for family reunions, and it ushered in an extended holiday period, during which tourism is proving popular.

On Tuesday, the fourth day of the Lunar New Year, the total number of people traveling between provincial-level regions reached approximately 301.4 million, an increase of 18.2 percent compared with the same period in 2023, Xinhua News Agency reported on Wednesday.

According to online booking website Meituan, as of Jan 21, tourism-related bookings, including for hotel accommodation, scenic tickets, transportation, etc, from the Lunar New Year's Eve to the eighth day of the Lunar New Year increased about seven times compared with last year.

Tuniu Travel Network pointed out in its 2024 Spring Festival Tourism Consumption Forecast Report that there is a clear trend of "cross-regional travel" during the holiday.

Specifically, tourists from Shanghai, as well as Jiangsu, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Hunan provinces are more inclined to choose the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and the Northeast as their destinations, while tourists from Beijing, Tianjin, Shaanxi and Shandong provinces and the three provinces in the northeast show a stronger desire to travel to Hainan, Guangdong, Yunnan and Jiangsu provinces and the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

At the Shenyang branch venue of the Spring Festival Gala, a performance featuring the *suona*, a traditional woodwind instrument, and a piano duet, a contrasting combination of northeastern folk songs and modern rap, along with the unique

snow and ice scenery, brought the festive atmosphere to a climax. During the holiday, Shenyang also experienced its first tourism peak.

The Changsha branch venue is located at the confluence of the Xiangjiang and Liuyang rivers, and attracted tourists and local residents after the broadcast of the Spring Festival Gala.

According to the local cultural and tourism department, Changsha planned nine tourism routes during the holiday, focusing on the beauty of Changsha's mountains and rivers, its rich culture, and its development momentum.

The Xi'an branch venue combined tradition and modernity, presenting a millennium-spanning poetic duet to the audience, allowing them to immerse themselves in the unique Lunar New Year atmosphere of the ancient city of Xi'an.

This poetic performance continued offline, becoming a highlight of Xi'an's cultural tourism activities.

Beautiful Kashgar steals festive television spotlight

By XING WEN
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This year's China Central Television Spring Festival Gala established a branch venue in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, specifically in Kashgar in the southwestern part of the region.

The stage of the Kashgar branch venue has been open to visitors since Saturday, the first day of the lunar calendar. Every night until the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the first lunar month, a large-scale night light show is being performed, attracting visitors from all over the country.

On Friday evening, an impressive eight-minute performance from the Xinjiang branch venue captured the spotlight as the gala was broadcast.

The innovative stage was set up on the rooftops of 12 houses in the Ancient City of Kashgar, a rammed-earth building complex with a 2,000-year history. The interplay of light and shadow on the stage, accompanied by dynamic music from ethnic instruments, featured local performers from diverse ethnic groups showcasing their singing and dancing.

Qin Zheng, director of the branch

venue, explained that this arrangement showcased the genuine way of life of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Xinjiang.

"These individuals lead fulfilling lives, find contentment and come together on the rooftops to share meals while participating in song and dance," she said.

The main program at the Kashgar branch brought together the most distinctive cultural symbols of this vibrant region, involving actors from different generations and ethnicities, with the youngest performer being only five years old.

Xinjiang, a pivotal point along the ancient Silk Road, has been a multi-ethnic settlement since ancient times. The diverse ethnic groups have established deep roots within Chinese civilization, fostering a vibrant and diverse history and culture through interactions, exchanges and integration.

"Trying to encapsulate all of this in a single performance is not an easy task. From the content of the program to the stage design, in the intertwining of the virtual and real, the fusion of technology and culture, we retained the most representative elements," added Qin.

The performance also showcased



Singers and dancers perform at the branch venue of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala in Kashgar, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, on Friday. YUETIKE NIJIAZI / FOR CHINA DAILY

a group of prominent figures from Xinjiang, such as singer Wang Hongwei, actress Dilraba Dilmurat, rapper Air and actor Yu Menglong.

Air's performance skillfully integrated rap culture with ethnic music. He noted that numerous musicians in Xinjiang have been actively exploring the path of cross-cultural integration in ethnic music, advocating its preservation, development and innovation.

Wei Zijie from Beijing and her family had planned to visit Kashgar for the past two years. Immediately after watching the performances in the city on the Spring Festival Gala, she

booked a trip and arrived in Kashgar on Tuesday for a four-day holiday.

She said that in the Spring Festival Gala, the exquisite Xinjiang costumes, dances and musical instruments vividly showcased the unique charm of the millennium-old city.

As of 1 pm on Saturday, the gala had been simultaneously broadcast and reported by over 2,300 media outlets from more than 200 countries and regions worldwide. Many Chinese people living overseas had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the beauty of Xinjiang through the eight-minute performance.

CHINA

Cinemas see bump in box office receipts

Movie ticket sales up as viewers flock to theaters to enjoy films during holiday

By XU FAN
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Bolstered by a string of blockbusters, the Spring Festival holiday – one of the country's most lucrative box office seasons – has witnessed a robust surge in ticket revenue this year, exceeding industry estimations, some insiders said.

From Feb 10, the start of the holiday, to Wednesday, cinemas grossed over 5.7 billion yuan (\$792.4 million). The take represents a 21 percent increase over the same five-day period last year, according to the movie information live tracker Beacon. The holiday will end on Saturday.

YOLO, the second directorial effort of Jia Ling, a comedic actress-turned-director, has topped the festival box office charts with its heartfelt tale of an oversized woman regaining self-confidence through boxing, resonating widely with young audiences yearning to become better versions of themselves.

In earlier interviews, Jia revealed that she had increased her weight to around 105 kilograms and then spent a year losing 50 kilograms through a strict diet and intense exercise to fit the movie's plotline and character design. The film, whose title means "You Only Live Once", has raked in 1.93 billion yuan.

Pegasus 2, the sequel to novelist-turned-director Han Han's 2019 movie *Pegasus*, is the second highest-grossing film so far during the holiday, raking in 1.69 billion yuan, followed by the animated feature *Boonie Bears: Time Twist* with 997 million yuan.

While *Pegasus 2*, with actor Shen Teng reprising his role as a former racing car champion, won over moviegoers with a tale of an underdog's incredible victory, *Boonie Bears: Time Twist*, the 10th installment of the titular franchise, attracted many children due to the enduring popularity of the bear siblings and their human friend, a logger who takes on a new job as a programmer in the latest movie.

Marking prolific director Zhang Yimou's return to the Spring Festival market after *Full River Red*, the highest-grossing film during the same period last year, *Article 20* – a movie exploring the definition of jus-

tifiable defense – is in fourth position with 881 million yuan.

Viva La Vida, which follows two young individuals' struggles against severe diseases, is in fifth place with 87 million, followed by the comedy *The Movie Emperor*, a poignant satire of the domestic movie industry starring iconic Hong Kong actor Andy Lau that has taken in 72 million yuan.

Eight new movies were simultaneously released on the first day of the Year of the Dragon, and they have collectively sold more than 100 million tickets, according to Beacon.

"The market performance is better than the earlier estimations of most industry insiders," said Zhi Feina, a veteran observer and professor at the Chinese National Academy of Arts.

She estimated that the overall box office receipts during this year's eight-day Spring Festival – which is one day longer than in previous years – will surpass 8 billion yuan, exceeding last year's weeklong holiday earnings of 6.76 billion yuan.

The most notable changes include the reduction of the average ticket price, the rising enthusiasm of theatergoers in third- and fourth-tier cities – who accounted for over 50 percent of the entire market – and the movies' themes being more related to the lives of ordinary Chinese people, said Zhi, adding that Chinese authorities have also endeavored to boost movie consumption.

On average, movie ticket prices are 50.7 yuan during this year's holiday, down 3 percent from 52.3 yuan last year, according to Beacon.

Earlier this month, the China Film Administration, the country's top industry regulator, and the People's Bank of China guided 11 financial institutions to issue over 30 million yuan in digital currencies to help boost electronic movie ticket purchases during the festival.

Rao Shuguang, president of the China Film Critics Association, said that most of the highest-grossing movies are comedies, proof that such light-hearted tales cater to the festival atmosphere and hence appeal to many filmgoers.

He added that the future challenge for the domestic film industry is how to attain stable and sustainable development and persuade Chinese people to walk into cinemas regularly, not only during big holidays.



People look at movie posters at a cinema in Shapingba, Chongqing, on Sunday. SUN KAIFANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Celebrating with basketball



Women participate in a basketball game to mark the Spring Festival holiday in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture, Guizhou province, on Tuesday. There are 75 teams of married women in the prefecture who play against each other regularly. LIANG WEN / FOR CHINA DAILY

FROM THE FRONTLINE

Women in Anhui address low fertility

By ZHANG YUNBI
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As China struggles with a shrinking birthrate, business is going on as usual at the bustling department of obstetrics and gynecology at Anqing Municipal Hospital, a leading medical facility in the southwest of Anhui province.

Xu Xiaofan, a 31-year-old woman who has been pregnant for 34 weeks, regularly visits the hospital for consultations and routine checks. Her first child is scheduled to be born next month.

Hailing from neighboring Chizhou city, Xu, who is using a pseudonym to protect her privacy, is a quality control worker at an automobile manufacturer. She married her husband, an Anqing native, in May last year.

"It is quite natural for both of us to have this baby. We did not make any special preparations," she said. "Yet these days, many young people are not willing to have children, and they have many concerns such as housing problems. Some do not even consider getting married."

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the fertility rate nationwide was 6.77 births per 1,000 people in 2022 and 6.39 per 1,000 last year.

Xu said that the willingness to have babies varies depending on the size of the cities people live in and their social surroundings.

Taking stock of her peers and close female friends who are also in their 30s and living in Anhui, Xu said most already have at least one child.

"The financial burden for young residents is much heavier in metropolises such as Shanghai

compared to Anqing," she said. "One of my cousins lives there, and he is already 36 years old. He and his wife are not planning to have a baby."

Data provided by local statistics authorities echoed her observations. The fertility rate in Anqing registered 6.07 births per 1,000 in 2022, while the rate in Shanghai that year was only 4.35 per 1,000.

Tong Chen, a physician in the hospital's obstetrics department who treated Xu on the eve of the Spring Festival holiday, is also a voluntary member of the hospital's concierge services.

She is a witness to the increasingly improving pregnancy checks being conducted in the country, which is part of nationwide efforts to boost fertility.

"These days, most women coming to deliver here were born between 1990 to 1995. For those born between 1985 to 1990, more of them are here to give birth to their second child," she said.

Tong, 34, joined the medical staff in 2010. She and her husband have two children.

"We had our second child by accident," she said, laughing. "The first child was born out of true love."

She also saw an uptick in the country's birthrate after restrictions on having a second child were lifted in 2015, though statistics have pointed to the cooling of the second-child boom in recent years.

"Recently, we have seen more pregnancies and deliveries of a first child than a second child," she said.

Jiang Xihuan, the head nurse of the department, is a certified fertility instructor with the International Childbirth Education Association.

Jiang, 55, specializes in the use

of music therapy and meditations to help relieve the pain of pregnancy and childbirth. She is also a local pioneer in applying these techniques and taught them in free training courses and workshops she offered to pregnant women in local communities last year.

In her eyes, the ongoing low fertility rate needs to be addressed with a holistic approach, as financial incentives are not enough to relieve the pressure and anxiety today's young women feel when it comes to childbearing and parenting.

"Decades ago, the country was way poorer, but people were more willing to have children. These days, negative narratives about childbirth shown in mass media are gaining more attention," she said.

"More should be done to help women address their physical and psychological pains during pregnancy and delivery, effectively value their sentiments and address their great emotional needs," she added.

While some Chinese have superstitions that babies born during the Year of Dragon may receive more blessings, Xu, the pregnant woman, said she did not intentionally plan to have a baby this year.

"The entire community should gain a panoramic perspective on the education backgrounds, household situations and living environments of young women," she said as she discussed the country's low fertility rates.

"If they have a greater financial burden, strive for higher education or have an ambitious career path, they may be more unwilling to have a child," she said.

Zhang Bing and He Jiang contributed to this story.

Rate: Central bank skips cut in key benchmark

From page 1

Demonstrating strengthened policy support, the PBOC cut the reserve requirement ratio – the proportion of money that lenders must keep as reserves – on Feb 5 by 0.5 percentage points and released 1 trillion yuan in long-term liquidity.

However, it skipped a widely anticipated cut in the medium-term lending facility rate or MLF rate – a key benchmark rate – last month. Instead, it implemented a targeted, cautious cut to policy benchmark rates for the agriculture sector and small enterprises.

Experts close to the PBOC said the factors weighing against broad-based interest rates cuts include the elevated US-China interest rate differential and commercial banks' narrowing profit margins.

Zhang, from the China Finance 40 Forum think tank, said the benefits of interest rate cuts should outweigh any negative impact. "As long as the economy is doing well, even if there are pressures in the financial sector, they can be resolved more easily."

The PBOC said in its fourth-quarter monetary policy report that it will deepen market-oriented reforms of interest rate formation and promote a decline in social financial costs while maintaining their overall stability.

Wang Jing, chief macroeconomic analyst at Golden Credit Rating International, said loan prime rates or LPRs – key market-oriented lending rate benchmarks – may decrease even if the MLF rate remains stable, while mortgage rates are likely to substantially decrease this year in order to stimulate property market recovery. China is expected to unveil its latest LPR figures on Tuesday.

Also on Friday, the commission revealed that it has investigated and dealt with a number of employees of China Merchants Securities for engaging in unauthorized stock transactions and other illegal trading activities, in a bid to maintain market integrity and enforce strict adherence to securities regulations.

Previously, the commission announced the first administrative penalty decision of this year, fining Beijing-based Ruihua Certified Public Accountants 17.83 million yuan for taking part in the financial fraud case of KDX, a supplier of polymer materials, from 2015 to 2017.

KDX's mandatory delisting from the Shenzhen Stock Exchange was enforced in 2021.

Securities regulator picks 'major' money market funds

By WANG KEJU
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China's securities regulator recently identified a number of newly designated major money market fund products and has put them under enhanced oversight, as part of the country's efforts to anchor investors' expectations and promote the sound development of its capital market.

The China Securities Regulatory Commission designated 13 such products as "major" money market funds to comply with stricter regulatory requirements under rules jointly

issued by the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, in February last year, the commission said in a statement on Friday.

Money market funds with assets under management exceeding 200 billion yuan (\$27.8 billion) or having more than 50 million individual investors, as stipulated in the rules, will be subject to evaluation for inclusion on the list.

Money market funds from China's top three asset-management firms – E Fund, China Asset and GF Fund, as well as from four other major money managers such as ICBC Credit Suisse Asset Manage-

ment and China Universal Asset Management – are on the list, according to the statement.

Money market funds have gained popularity among investors seeking safe, liquid investment options that offer competitive yields, said Yang Chengzhang, chief economist with Shenwan Hongyuan Securities.

With their unique characteristics, such as stable net asset value and short-term investment horizons, money market funds have emerged as an attractive choice for individuals seeking to preserve capital while generating modest returns, Yang added.

The recent announcement of the major money market fund list reinforces the industry's risk resistance capabilities, Yang said, adding that by subjecting funds to a comprehensive evaluation process, regulatory authorities aim to ensure that these funds adhere to stringent standards and possess robust risk management practices.

Going forward, the commission will conduct assessments of money market funds on a regular basis, so as to include those that meet the criteria for listing among the major money market funds as appropriate, and will publicize information

in accordance with relevant regulations.

Data from financial information provider Wind shows that, as of the end of last year, certain money market fund products from investment management firms such as Fullgoal Fund, CCB Investment and Ping An UOB Fund are on the verge of being included on the list based on either their asset volume or individual investor scale.

The commission, along with the PBOC, will make joint efforts to strengthen the risk monitoring and daily supervision of key money market funds, aiming to promote a safer and more stable operation of money market funds while safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of fund shareholders.

COVER



From left: Fruits are sold at an open-air market in Nanqijia village in Beijing's Changping district on Jan 11. People enjoy noodles at the Shahe Market in Changping on Jan 7. Shoppers browse products at the market.

Fairs: Affordable products drive popularity

From page 1

The Shahe Market in suburban Beijing covers an area of 120,000 square meters and is among the Chinese capital's largest open-air markets. It attracts thousands of shoppers when it opens every Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

The unique selling point of the market is that people find everything they need here — and more, Guo said.

And he is absolutely right.

The market not just offers daily necessities such as fruits and vegetables, street food and antique items, one might also spot vendors selling katydids, which are large, typically green, long-horned nocturnal grasshoppers that are kept as pets by many people.

"Everything is so down-to-earth here, which is in stark contrast to the modern city life in Beijing. It is a fond reminder of my childhood days — the good times I spent with my family at the open-air markets near my native village in Gansu province," Guo said.

Daji, which translates as a "big market or fair", is typically held on specific dates based on the lunar calendar, such as dates ending with five or seven. It is also a common practice to hold *daji* ahead of or during traditional Chinese holidays such as the Spring Festival holiday. Visiting such fairs is popularly termed as *ganji*, which literally means "chasing the market".

These markets or fairs evolved from the folk custom of trading in goods, which can be traced back to the Han dynasties (206 BC-AD 220).

In the olden days, due to a lack of convenient means of transportation and communication, it was challenging for households to meet their needs for daily necessities. As a solution, people made agreements to gather on a particular day at a specific location, where they traded their surplus goods for the items they needed.

In addition to being venues for buying and selling, these markets became occasions for people to socialize and be entertained.

Today, when supermarkets are found in almost every corner of Beijing and online shopping platforms offer same-day grocery delivery services, Guo said he still enjoys visiting the Shahe Market.

"The fruits and vegetables here may not be as well presented and packaged as those in the supermarkets, and some may even be covered in soil, but they are always fresh and more affordable," he said, adding that he also enjoys talking to the vendors and learning about the efforts they put into growing their produce. "The market has brought people closer."

Since last year, more young people have started visiting the Shahe Market, which was traditionally the favorite haunt of the older generations, according to Guo. "They (young people) are very noticeable. You can tell by their colorful coats and hairdos."

Chen Xiaoyi, 26, who works for an IT company in Beijing, said she loves the market's lively vibe. More importantly, shopping here is affordable and helps her save up money for the future, she said.

Chen first visited the market last May after she saw a post about it on social media. Now, visiting the market almost every weekend has become a habit, she said.

"It's like a mini break from my stressful work life. Some people go hiking in the mountains during the weekend, I hike to the market," she said, as she waited at a stall to buy some freshly squeezed sugar cane juice, which she plans to use later to make sugar cane Americano.

The young techie said the best



Top: Spring Festival decorations such as lanterns and couplets are sold at the Shahe Market on Jan 7. Above: A visitor gets a taste of the market. Below: People shop for farm produce at an open-air market in Nanqijia village on Jan 11. Below right: A little girl holds a cabbage her parents bought at the market in Nanqijia.



Fortune magnets, phone cases among popular buys made by young people

Fridge magnets featuring the God of Wealth, cellphone cases with messages of good luck and good fortune, and red envelopes themed after the Year of the Dragon are among the most popular buys made for Spring Festival by young people in China, according to a leading direct-to-consumer online platform.

In January, the number of searches for such products made by young people on the Taogongchang online platform increased over threefold year-on-year, the company said, adding that most buyers preferred portable and durable products, which were also good value for money and reflected their heartfelt sentiments.

While young people have tried to be practical and innovative when drafting their Spring Festival shopping lists, they didn't leave out the essentials such as couplets and socks and underwear in red for people who were born in the Year of the Dragon, the company said.

According to a lifestyle market survey on trends during Spring Festival, young people in China are play-

ing a greater role as decision-makers this year.

About 83 percent of the respondents, ages 18 to 35 years, consider themselves or their partners to be primary planners for the festival, according to the survey report jointly published in January by market research institute Kantar Worldpanel China and lifestyle-focused social media platform Xiaohongshu.

The survey found that hot commodities during Spring Festival this year include clothes, accessories, snacks, alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, and fresh produce. Also, compared with Spring Festival last year, 68 percent of the respondents said they plan to increase their spending on the holiday this year.

On social media platforms, young people are exploring ideas for a joyful holiday, including indulging in culinary delights, sharing local specialties, experiencing diverse cuisines, checking out outdoor markets or galas, and taking part in banquets and other activities, the report added.

CUI JIA

part about visiting the market is that she can wear casual and comfortable clothes, and no makeup at all. "I know for sure that no one will judge me here. I quite like the crowd of shoppers at the market, even though I hate crowds in general because I have to squeeze into packed subway trains to go to work every morning," she said.

Shopping at the Shahe Market has helped her cut down her monthly spending on groceries by more than 1,000 yuan (\$140), because most products are cheaper than those available at central Beijing's supermarkets, Chen said.

"For example, the price of strawberries, which I love, is nearly half here compared with the price of strawberries at the supermarket near my apartment. In other words, this market is good for the body, the soul and the wallet," said the techie, who has already introduced her friends and colleagues to the Shahe Market.

Chen, who has also been sharing her experiences on social media, has come across many like-minded young people who see visiting open-air markets as fun. "Together, we have located more such markets in the suburbs of Beijing, and I am planning to visit them one by one."

Li Yang, an undergraduate student at Beihang University, said the Shahe Market is popular among university students as well. "Getting up early on a winter morning to attend classes is so hard, but getting up early to go to the market for a hearty breakfast is fairly easy," he said.

After breakfast, Li and his classmates often throw a challenge to see how many things they can buy at the market for 100 yuan.

"I once struck a great bargain — I bought three long-sleeve tops and two pairs of sweatpants for 100 yuan. My friends said the clothes look just as chic as those sold by top international brands. When they visited the market the following week, the vendor was no longer there. I believe that's why this market is so much fun," the 21-year-old said.

Open-air markets have mushroomed around the city over the past year after the Beijing municipal government decided to support the development of street vending economy, said Liu Hong, a regular vendor at such markets.

The 42-year-old, who sells baked buns with shredded braised pork, has been doing brisk business in three to four open-air markets each week in Beijing's Changping and Shunyi districts. "As different markets are held on different days, I can find one to sell my buns each day of the week if I want to."

Liu, who is from Hebei province, had a small restaurant in Beijing where he sold his baked buns, noodles and soup. Business took a hit during the COVID-19 pandemic and he couldn't pay the rent for the restaurant space. He had no choice but to shut it down.

At an open-air market in Changping's Nanqijia village, Liu needs to pay only 30 yuan a day to rent a stall, so there is much less pressure on him to run his business.

"Also, I really enjoy the lively atmosphere at these markets. You can tell that the ambience is lifting people's moods as they walk around, or browse products. People are much nicer to each other," Liu said, taking a bun out of the oven for a customer, who in turn offered him one of the oranges she had just bought from another vendor.

"Maybe I will open a restaurant again someday after I am able to save up enough money, but I will definitely miss my time at these markets, which have cast a magical spell," he added.

WORLD

Gaza cease-fire talks end sans breakthrough

Rafah braces for Israeli bombardment as humanitarian situation deteriorates

CAIRO/JERUSALEM/GAZA — Talks involving several parties on the Gaza truce ended without a breakthrough on Tuesday as calls grew for Israel to hold back on a planned assault on the southern end of the enclave, crammed with over a million displaced people.

The city of Rafah, whose pre-conflict population was about 300,000, is teeming with homeless people living in tent camps and makeshift shelters. They had fled there from Israeli bombardments in areas of Gaza farther north during more than four months of conflict.

Israel says it wants to flush out Hamas militants from hideouts in Rafah and free Israeli hostages being held there. Its military is making plans to evacuate Palestinian civilians. But no plan has been forthcoming and aid agencies say the displaced have nowhere else to go in the shattered territory.

With Palestinians in Rafah "staring death in the face," United Nations aid chief Martin Griffiths said an Israeli ground invasion there would make humanitarian relief nearly impossible.

"Military operations in Rafah could lead to a slaughter in Gaza. They could also leave an already fragile humanitarian operation at death's door," Griffiths said in a statement.

Israeli tanks shelled the eastern sector of Rafah overnight, causing waves of panic, residents said.

They said displaced people — dozens so far — had begun to leave Rafah after Israeli shelling and airstrikes in recent days.

"Last night in Rafah was very tough. We're going back to Al-Maghazi out of fear — displaced from one area to another," said Nahla Jarwan, referring to the coastal refugee camp from which she fled earlier in the conflict. "Wherever we go, there is no safety."

Rafah neighbors Egypt, but Cairo has made clear it will not allow a refugee exodus over the border.

Gaza health officials announced 133 new Palestinian deaths in the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 28,473 killed and 68,146 wounded since Oct 7, when 1,200 people were killed in a Hamas rampage across

the border into Israel, triggering the conflict.

About half of Gaza's 2.3 million people are now squeezed into Rafah.

"Since Israel said they are invading Rafah soon ..., we read our last prayers every night. Every night we say farewell to one another and to relatives outside Rafah," said Aya, 30, who is living in a tent with her mother, grandmother and five siblings.

In Cairo, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi held talks with CIA Director William Burns and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani aimed at agreeing a Gaza truce, protecting civilians and delivering more aid into the enclave, Egypt's state information service said.

The Egyptian statement made no mention of Israel. The Israeli delegation left Cairo for home, Reuters reported. The Israeli prime minister's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A Hamas source told Agence France-Presse that a delegation was headed to the Egyptian capital to meet Egyptian and Qatari mediators after Israeli negotiators held talks with the mediators on Tuesday.

Israel has vowed to fight on, for many months if necessary, until it eradicates Hamas.

Plea to UN court

Meanwhile, South Africa asked the International Court of Justice on Tuesday to consider whether Israel's plan to extend its offensive into Rafah required additional emergency measures to safeguard the rights of Palestinians.

In a case brought by South Africa, the UN court last month ordered Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent its troops from committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. Israel denied it was committing genocide and asked the court to reject the case outright.

A Dutch court on Monday ordered the government to block all exports of F-35 fighter jet parts to Israel over concerns they were being used to violate international law during the conflict.

AGENCIES—XINHUA



A resident wipes snow off a car during a winter snowstorm in Philadelphia on Tuesday. MATT ROURKE / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Storm dumps heavy snow across US Northeast

CHICAGO/ATLANTA — A powerful, fast-moving winter storm dumped more than 30 centimeters of snow on parts of New England on Tuesday after it brought New York City its first significant snowfall in at least two years.

Some 13 million people from New York City north into southern New England remained under a winter storm warning until 7 pm as the Nor'easter pummeled the region with heavy, wet snow and winds of up to 96.56 kilometers per hour, said the National Weather Service.

In Fall River, Massachusetts, where snow totals were expected to reach more than 22 cm, all Valentine's Day flower deliveries from

Robin Metivier's Main Street Florist were canceled on Tuesday.

"It's the day before Valentine's Day and I had to tell my customers we can't do it," she said, looking out of her shop window at the snow that forced her to shovel twice already. "We're tough New Englanders, but the flowers can't take the cold."

The storm brings a conclusive end to a "snow drought" in New York City that lasted almost two years. The snowless stretch had exacerbated concerns over global warming.

More than 2,000 plow trucks were working to salt and clear streets, city officials said during a briefing, urging property owners to clear snow from their walks.

"NYC remains under a travel advisory today as temperatures drop & snow melts, leading to the possibility of icy roads," the city's emergency management agency said on X, urging drivers to exercise caution.

Jan Gautam, the head of the Manhattan-based snow removal company Novus Maintenance, said he was up all night and into the morning assembling his crews to run more than a dozen snow plows and 30 sidewalk plows to hit the streets of New York.

"In a storm like this, with so much snow coming fast, we have to go back to the same locations over and over, to keep it clear and safe," he said.

Some 130,000 homes and businesses were without power in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and West Virginia, according to Poweroutage.us.

School districts across the region canceled in-person classes for the day, including New York City, which was holding classes remotely for its 1 million students.

Airlines canceled more than 1,220 flights, including 43 percent of flights at New York's domestic LaGuardia Airport as well as one in five flights at the city's main air hub JFK, according to aviation tracker Flight Aware.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Indonesians go to polls to elect new leader

By LEONARDUS JEGHO in Jakarta and PRIME SARMIENTO in Hong Kong

Millions of Indonesian voters flocked to polls on Wednesday, casting their ballots for the next national and local leaders who will lead Southeast Asia's biggest economy in the next five years.

The polls were dubbed the world's biggest simultaneous elections on a single day with voters across the world's largest archipelago voting for a new president, vice-president as well as local legislators and members of the regional representatives council.

Three pairs are contending for the president and vice-president posts while candidates from 2710 electoral districts are competing for a total of 20,462 seats at the country's different legislative levels.

The election was peaceful, and there are no official results yet. But a quick count streamed at The Jakarta Post showed Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto leading the race. Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Subianto's running mate and the eldest son of incumbent President Joko Widodo, is also leading the vice-president race, according to the unofficial quick count.

There are over 204 million registered voters, over 50 percent of whom are under the age of 40, scattered across the vast archipelago that covers three time zones. Balloting started at 7 am and concluded at 1 pm local time. Poll workers have started count-



A woman casts her ballot at a polling station in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Wednesday. VERI SANOVRI / XINHUA

ing the votes and will report the results to the General Elections Commission, which has 35 days to announce the official results.

Daniel Johanis Taraneno, head of the election committee of Merauke in South Papua Province, said that balloting in the whole province had gone smoothly thanks to the electronic voting system.

"In Merauke, roads are so good, much better than a decade ago. Area's transportation links to other parts of the island have developed so well," Taraneno said.

In Kupang, the provincial capital of East Nusa Tenggara, voters went to the polling stations despite the rains in the morning. Amatus Bhela, an educator and social activist, said Subianto and Raka are popular among local voters because the duo promised to con-

tinue Widodo's programs, including social assistance programs.

"In Kupang and most parts of East Nusa Tenggara, people want that assistance. They see Prabowo-Gibran and they remember Jokowi (President Widodo)," Bhela said.

Lucius Karus, a senior researcher at Jakarta-based Masyarakat Peduli Parlemen, or Parliament Watch, said most voters are keen on the election of a president and vice-president than that of local lawmakers. Karus said this is because most voters believe national officials deliver more concrete programs.

Leonardus Jegho is a freelance journalist for China Daily.

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Briefly

RUSSIA

Estonia PM on wanted list for razing memorials

Russia declared Estonian leader Kaja Kallas and several other European officials as "wanted" on Tuesday over their alleged involvement in the destruction of Soviet-era memorials, according to the Russian interior ministry's database. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Kallas was wanted for the "desecration of historical memory." Since Russia's special military operation in February 2022, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have demolished most of their Soviet-era monuments, including those commemorating Soviet soldiers killed in World War II.

CAUCASUS

Four Armenian soldiers killed in border firing

Four Armenian soldiers were killed after Azerbaijan launched a "retaliation operation" near the border in response to earlier provocations, authorities from both sides said on Tuesday. Azerbaijan's border service said in a statement that it had conducted a "retaliation operation", destroying the Armenian combat post near the village of Nerkin Hand in response to earlier actions of the Armenian Armed Forces. The Armenian Ministry of Defense said in a Telegram statement that Azerbaijan's gunfire left four dead and one injured on the Armenian side. Russia hopes that both sides will continue their peace negotiations, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.

FRANCE

Notre-Dame scaffolding begins to come down

The scaffolding around the spire of Paris' Notre Dame cathedral has begun to come down, the authority charged with restoring the monument after a devastating 2019 fire said on Tuesday. The spire should be entirely visible by the time the Olympic Summer Games open in the French capital on July 26, it said. The scaffolding reached 100 meters in height, weighed 600 tons and contained 70,000 metal parts. In December, the cathedral regained its great cross, and got a new golden rooster to replace the old one that was destroyed in the April 15, 2019 fire.

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Senate passes Ukraine bill; hurdles remain

WASHINGTON — The Democratic-led US Senate on Tuesday passed a long-sought \$95 billion military aid package for Ukraine, although it faced an uncertain path ahead in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives as the leader of the House said he has no intention even of allowing a vote on the bill.

After months of negotiations and political infighting, lawmakers approved the measure in a 70-29 vote in the Senate that exceeded the 60-vote threshold for passage and sent the legislation on to the House. Twenty-two Republicans joined most Democrats to support the bill.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told a news conference later on Tuesday he was confident the bill would pass the House with support from both parties if Republican Speaker Mike Johnson would allow a vote.

Johnson told reporters he has no intention even of allowing a vote on the bill. "I certainly don't," he said.

The bill was approved in the Senate earlier on Tuesday. It includes \$95 billion in funding, mostly for the security of Ukraine.

"History is watching," said President Joe Biden, repeating the phrase five times in televised remarks.

Biden also lashed out at his likely challenger in the November election Donald Trump after the former one-term president encouraged Russia to attack NATO members who failed to meet financial commitments.

The bill passed easily in the Senate. But Johnson then said he could not address Ukraine's security without first having strict new measures to stop illegal migration into the United States across the Mexican border.

Trump — who dominates the Republican Party despite losing the last election and now facing 91

criminal counts in four separate cases — has pulled the strings in Congress throughout the saga.

He opposes helping Ukraine's fight against Russia, saying he would resolve the conflict in one day if elected. He has openly told lawmakers not to pass US border reforms while campaigning heavily on what he says is a desperate need to fix the border.

Biden has attacked Trump for using the border issue as a political battering ram.

Mayorkas impeached

One week after a failed impeachment vote, the House of Representatives on Tuesday voted to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, making him the

first cabinet member to be impeached in nearly 150 years.

On Feb 6, Mayorkas narrowly survived an impeachment vote in the House, with a vote tally of 214 to 216.

In the latest development, the lower chamber voted 214 to 213, with three Republicans defecting from their party to join Democrats to vote against the impeachment against the Biden administration's top border official.

About the same number of voters in an ABC Ipsos poll on Sunday blamed Republicans (53 percent), and Democrats (51 percent), but Biden was blamed by 49 percent for the failure to pass border laws — while only 39 percent blamed Trump.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

PEOPLE

By ZHAO RUINAN in Nanchang
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When Liu Yan visited Jingdezhen 11 years ago, she came across a pink peach-shaped celestial globe vase. It so impressed her that she decided to stay in the porcelain capital.

"It was my second visit to Jingdezhen in 2013, when I saw the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) porcelain at the Jingdezhen China Ceramics Museum. The artwork was gorgeous, and a strong urge grew in my mind at that moment: 'It would be wonderful if I could create something like this.'"

She had recently quit her job as the chief editor of the weekly news department at Changsha Evening News in southern China's Hunan province. She was seeking something new.

Liu began a decade-long journey of studying overglaze enameling, the technique of painting glazed pottery. She started with the basics, such as grinding pigments and drawing lines.

Over time, her passion for painting on porcelain grew. She spent her leisure time reading books, drinking tea, and even bought a used electric bicycle to explore Jingdezhen. Her life there differs greatly from her previous urban working life.

"People in Jingdezhen have a unique aura," she said. "Jingdezhen is home to many interesting and like-minded individuals or artists, and everyone lives based on their skills in this down-to-earth paradise."

Jingdezhen's ceramic craftsmanship history dates back over 2,000 years. Located in East China's Jiangxi province, its historical role as an official and imperial kiln propelled the art of porcelain making to unprecedented heights. Dubbed the capital of porcelain, Jingdezhen has become a popular destination for young potters and people seeking to suspend their busy and overstressed urban life.

"Jingdezhen is a unique and simple place where everyone is treated equally, and no one is judged based on their possessions or status," said Liu.

Like Liu, more than 30,000 people known as *Jingpiao* or "Jingdezhen drifters" have migrated to the city from across China, according to data from the local authorities in 2022.

For escapees of the urban grind, porcelain has become a lifestyle: slow, deliberate artistry to offset the abstraction, alienation, and pressures of modern life.

Huang Lizi set up her ceramic studio in Jingdezhen after graduating in 2022.

"I feel like I'm living another kind of life compared to urban people. Life here is slow but cute, as living costs are relatively low," she said.

But as a craft woman who has to earn a living by making ceramics, she has also been through some difficulties.

"It's easy to start up your own business in Jingdezhen, but you have to be more creative and have better-than-average skills to meet the market."

"After all, your products have to



Young artisans sell self-made porcelain artworks at the Taoxichuan Spring and Autumn Art fair in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, in October.
ZHOU MI / XINHUA

Creatives find their muse in small town culture

Art, business and life converge in Jingdezhen, China's porcelain capital



Above: Liu Yan works on a ceramics bowl at her studio, in Jingdezhen.

PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Right: Torsten Jurell works in his studio at the Taoxichuan ceramic art avenue in Jingdezhen in April. The Swedish artist came to the porcelain capital in 2011.

ZHOU MI / XINHUA



sell out to make a living," she said. Admiring the young Chinese people flocking to Jingdezhen, foreigners have also found a home in the small city.

According to incomplete statistics, more than 5,000 foreign artists live in Jingdezhen. Thousands of ceramic industry professionals gather for the annual Jingdezhen China International Ceramic Fair every October, seeking collaboration and inspiration.

Nick Vest, a 31-year-old artist from Pennsylvania in the United States, arrived in Jingdezhen eight years ago and planted the roots of his artistic career as a sculptor.

Over the years, he has presented more than 25 ceramic exhibitions across nine different countries, with his most recent exhibition taking place at the Jingdezhen Sculpture Factory.

"I hope to spend more time in China, especially in Jingdezhen. The artistic atmosphere here is so vibrant, and the fusion of art and life is more pronounced," Vest said. In addition to serving as a place of inspiration for ceramic artists, Jingdezhen's charms present new opportunities for commercialization.

In 2019, Jingdezhen was approved as a national ceramic culture inheritance and innovation pilot zone. Hu Xuemei, Jingdezhen's mayor, said this has opened new doors.

In Zhushan district, where many *Jingpiao* reside, ceramic art labor unions have been established along with other institutions aiming to provide diverse activities and services to *Jingpiao* from domestic and international backgrounds, enhancing their sense of belonging, Hu said.

In 2018, Liu came up with the idea of designing and creating her own ceramic art to sell online. "I started my career in making and selling self-designed ceramics with my friends in Jingdezhen. Over time, our team has grown to include more than a dozen people," she said.

Liu now has over 240,000 followers on her Weibo account, and her Taobao store is a recognized heritage store for ceramic aesthetics. Her store's best-selling item is a light yellow osmanthus-shaped ceramic tea set, which sells at about 600 yuan, with hundreds of sets sold monthly.

In the future, Liu wants to spread awareness of Jingdezhen and its exquisite ceramics to more people worldwide. "I spent a few months in Kyoto, Japan, last spring and discovered that even Japanese tea masters and foreigners have limited knowledge about Jingdezhen due to insufficient people-to-people exchanges. They only recognize some tableware and large jars displayed in museums."

"I want to introduce Jingdezhen and ceramics here to Japanese people and would like to hold an exhibition in Tokyo this year, if possible, to showcase Jingdezhen ceramics and the process of making ceramics."

"Jingdezhen should and must be seen by the world."

Like a flower, resilient entrepreneur always grows toward the sun

By DU JUAN
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"I never imagined that I would one day become a jewelry designer, as I never studied such majors as arts or design in universities, nor did I have any training in this regard. If not for the wonderful people I encountered in my life, my journey would have become quite different."

After graduating as an English major at Renmin University of China in the 1990s, Qian Jing embarked on her professional journey by first stepping into the corporate world at a Fortune 500 American company operating in China.

Qian made a bold career move at the age of 27 and joined a French company where she became the head of the company's PR and Government Affairs department in China.

Qian, more commonly called Lucy, carries an entrepreneurial spirit in business and her personal life.

Retired journalist Chen Yi, who has known Lucy since the beginning of her career in multinational companies, considered her "a

woman of remarkable resilience akin to a sunflower, never withers regardless of where she is planted, but grows toward the sun in all seasons."

In 2007, Qian made another significant career decision by establishing a consultancy firm, leveraging the years of experience and networking she had accumulated from working with multinational companies in China, providing consulting services to both foreign and domestic enterprises.

Her life transformed in 2006 when she started volunteering. She met Sarah Randt, the wife of the former US ambassador to China, who co-founded the Dandelion School in Beijing's Daxing District, a charity school dedicated to providing quality education for children of migrant workers.

As a volunteer, Qian assisted the school in organizing charitable fundraising events. She noticed how Sarah always exuded elegance and captivated everyone's attention during these events. Sarah adorned herself with exquisite traditional Chinese dresses for every occasion, complemented by dazzling jewelry pieces.



More than a decade later, Sarah highlights her outfits with a jewelry brand created and designed by Qian. Knowing Sarah's fondness for large and uniquely shaped baroque pearls, Qian designed a gold-wrapped exotic pearl necklace and earrings set.

From the bottom of her heart, Qian considered Sarah her mentor, even though Sarah never specifically taught her about jewelry fashion. Before meeting Sarah, Lucy had no

understanding of pearls and was unaware that China is the world's largest producer of freshwater pearls. "It is through knowing her that I gradually came to appreciate the various types of jewelry: necklaces, earrings, brooches, rings, and the magic they'll do to brighten up your outfit," she said.

With an ever-turning mind, Qian continuously seeks new opportunities for herself in her

pipeline. In 2016, she founded Lucy Q Jewelry.

Upon seeing her wearing her brand's finery, her former neighbor exclaimed, "How did you become a jewelry designer?! You never used to wear anything like this before!"

Shortly after its launch, Lucy Q Jewelry won the recognition of celebrity fashion publisher and writer Hung Huang, who began selling Lucy Q designs in her store Brand New China (BNC), a boutique that housed original designs by Chinese fashion & accessory creators.

"Even though BNC closed later on, I always feel the inspiration from Hung Huang that China should have its own fashion designers, and an ordinary white collar woman like myself could also become a jewelry designer."

Qian believes that by understanding her clients, she can provide trendy accessories to women who love life.

"By saving their selection cost and offering the most efficient solutions, I provide them with high-quality products at a better value than brand boutiques and more time-saving compared to

online shopping," she said. "Professionals often lack time, yet they frequently need to find gifts for their bosses and colleagues who are leaving or celebrating birthdays. Selecting gifts is not an easy task and requires effort."

Seeing the demand, Qian selects gift choices based on clients' preferences.

"Typically, I recommend at least two solutions, allowing them to choose the one that resonates with them. As someone with a corporate background, I also ensure the solutions are within the budget limit and in line with the codes of conduct at multinational corporations. I provide a total service that includes classy wrapping and packaging of the products using deep blue velvet or other material that spares my clients time in this regard, in addition to the value-added services such as floral cards."

Qian often encourages her friends, saying, "Never give up on yourself. Life is not only to please others but also to nurture your own spirit. Be elegant throughout your life: beautiful at 20, captivating at 40, and irresistible for the rest of your life!"

READ

Millet desserts bring sweet taste of success

Baker's unique creations lead to fame and business opportunities in capital suburb

By WANG XIAOYU
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Jinpoluo village in northeastern Beijing has boasted bountiful harvests of millets for centuries and now a dessert chef, Liu Tiantian, is adding her brand of sweetness to the place by using the ancient grain to make Western-style desserts.

In February 2022, she opened the SiiKoo Patisserie near the west end of the village. It sells her inventive menu of millet cookies, millet pudding, hawthorn berry cakes and chestnut Napoleon pastries, along with classic pound cake and croissants.

Nearly two years later, Liu, 35, said she took pride in that her little store had pulled through despite the COVID-19 pandemic and its remote location.

Moreover, she is proud of fulfilling her aspiration of promoting local rural products to a wider audience and introducing the sweet items that have enamored her since she was a little girl to the region where she spent her childhood.

"We have customers, intrigued by millet-based creations, driving several hours from neighboring Hebei province and Tianjin, to eat our desserts," she said.

"We have also seen local villagers who treat their grandsons and granddaughters who return during holidays with a cup of coffee or a piece of cake from our store."

Jinpoluo village sits in Beijing's Miyun district and has around 3,000 residents. Nestled between rolling hills, the village has vast millet fields that turn a shade of gold in the autumn, hence the name Jinpoluo, meaning "golden wicker basket" in Chinese.

Liu was born in Neijiang, Sichuan province and moved to Beijing's Miyun district with her family at around 6 years old.

"When I was a kid, my mom often brought me to the city center and I was always drawn by hotel staff making desserts, staring at them through the floor-to-ceiling glass window. I still remember the scene where a baker sprinkled coconut flakes all over a cake," she said.

While relishing every dessert that she could get her hands on, making desserts by herself struck Liu as an intimidating task that only trained professionals were capable of.

She finished her bachelor's degree in teaching Chinese as a foreign language at a university in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, and went to the United States for further study.

"At that time, I saw my cousin baking a cake from a prepackaged powder mix and I thought to myself maybe I could bake as well," she said.

Liu dived into courses and workshops in the United States, United Kingdom, Hong Kong and the famous Lenotre Culinary Arts School in Paris, France. She eventually decided to drop out of school to accumulate experience in running bakeries across China.

In late 2020, she returned to Miyun and began searching for a place to start her own shop.

"A friend of mine suggested I visit Jinpoluo for inspiration," she said. "I was first impressed by the quality of the cherries grown locally and the number of tourists flocking here during the summer to pick fruit," said Liu.

"Then I heard that the village also produces millet, pumpkins, chestnuts and walnuts, and it occurred to me that all of these ingredients can be used to make desserts."

Another attraction for Liu, she said, is that the village has a cooperative that pools resources from all farmers and villagers and is organic.

After deciding to settle in Jinpoluo, Liu experimented with her calling card item — millet cookies — for several months.

"Millet is a relatively healthy staple food, just like quinoa seeds, and is gaining popularity overseas," she said. "Unlike wheat that can be ground into very fine flour, millet flour is coarser and doughs made with it cannot be as stretchy



Liu Tiantian (right) promotes her bakery products during a livestream session at her shop in Jinpoluo village in Beijing's Miyun district in 2022. JU HUANZONG / XINHUA



Liu Tiantian (right) makes millet pastry with local resident Yang Hongyan in Jinpoluo village in 2022. JU HUANZONG / XINHUA



Millet puddings are ready for sale at SiiKoo Patisserie. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Taste is a subjective matter and all we can do is to make sure that we use high-quality materials and ensure that each batch meets our own standards."

Liu Tiantian, owner of SiiKoo Patisserie in Jinpoluo village in northwestern Beijing

due to online promotion but soon disappear as social media allure ebbs.

"The tag implies that the business will be short-lived and lack prospects in the long term," she said. "But for us, I think the store has core competitive advantages — we have invented our own variety of items and we have local villagers as a steady source of employees."

Throughout a Friday morning — a relative downtime for the store — Liu could hardly take a break, busy checking expiration dates of a new batch of milk, examining the freshness of blueberries she ordered online and asking helpers to clean straw packaging and litter off the ground.

Around 10:30 am, the buttery, yeasty scent of freshly baked products permeated the shop. The first customer of the day stepped in, ordered a cup of coffee, a millet cookie and enjoyed them by the windowsill.

Outside her store, local villagers gathered to chat and play cards under the warm sunlight, while several parked their tricycles loaded with sweet potato vermicelli noodles, Chinese salty crepes and other homemade specialties, appealing to customers who visit the patisserie.

"This courtyard in front of my store has become the central business district of Jinpoluo," she said half-jokingly.

Liu recently leased a house about a five-minute walk away and was renovating it into a storage house and an activity place to hold workshops for school children as well as adults.

"I don't make long-term plans for my business and I want my pace to be steady," she said. "But if there is a market need, such as growing queries about learning baking skills, I will definitely grab the opportunity and make a move."



Liu Tiantian stands outside SiiKoo Patisserie in Beijing's Miyun district. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

and soft as those made with wheat flour."

Achieving a desirable texture and taste — slightly crumbly with a nutty flavor — could suffice for a baking hobbyist at home. However, Liu understood that opening a bakery requires standardized procedures and consistent output.

Liu worked with the rural cooperative and trained three female villagers on key baking skills, from making cookie batter to decorating cakes.

"Teaching them how to make desserts was actually quite convenient because they were willing to learn and meticulous in copying every

single step that I demonstrated," she said.

Over time, the number of apprentices at the shop has grown to over a dozen, Liu said.

"Local villagers have also learned to adjust recipes based on the size of eggs and the condition of different batches of millet and flour," she added.

In November, a food reviewer and former pastry chef with nearly two million followers on Douyin, the Chinese version of the short video app TikTok, visited the store and spoke highly of its products.

He was effusive in his praise for

one particular item — a fusion of the decadent, cream cheese-based Basque cake and locally produced pumpkin.

"The creamy cake and sweet pumpkin are a great match, which gives a sense of satisfaction and is not cloying at all," he said in a video that drew 80,000 likes. "I think this store not only excels in its business idea, but also in its presentation of the final dish."

The online influencer's patronage instantly brought a wave of customers to Liu's store and inevitably generated some scathing reviews from those who felt the taste did not live

up to their expectations.

"We had been preparing and running the business for nearly three years and were suddenly thrust into the spotlight. I felt under great pressure and was anxious for a while," she said.

"But later I realized that taste is a subjective matter and all we can do is to make sure that we use high-quality materials and ensure that each batch meets our own standards."

Liu said she did not intend her place to be deemed among the legions of "internet celebrity stores" — businesses that take off suddenly

IMAGE



Tourists experience paper cutting of the dragon in Beijing on Jan 20. ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

RISE OF THE DRAGON

As Year of the Rabbit comes to a close, country welcomes in new sign of the zodiac



A couple, wearing traditional costumes and holding a dragon-shaped handcraft, take photos outside the Deshou Palace, which doubles as the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) Deshou Palace Ruins Museum, in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, on Jan 15. HAN CHUANHAO / FOR CHINA DAILY



Spring Festival Lanterns of the Year of the Dragon light up in Yu Garden, Shanghai, on Jan 21. The gorgeous lights show the spectacular scene of the Chinese dragon soaring and the prosperity of the glorious times. GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY

It is the symbol of Chinese nationality and of potent and auspicious powers. It has control over water, rainfall, hurricanes and floods. It is also the symbol of good luck. Chinese people have revered it for thousands of years. It is the dragon. And with the Lunar New Year approaching, the

Year of the Dragon has arrived. At the beginning of the Chinese Lunar New Year, people all around the country play with this mythical creature. They hang it in shopping centers, carry it on bamboo sticks in parades through the streets, carve its head onto boats which they race on ice and perform a dance named after it.

The dragon has lots of auspicious meanings. It is the harbinger of happiness and good fortune and has sublime connections to Chinese nationality. Many people believe playing with a dragon brings good fortune.

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People perform Drunken Dragon Dance in Zhongshan, Guangdong province, on Dec 24, 2023. Recognized as an item of China's national intangible cultural heritage, Drunken Dragon Dance originates from Changzhou village in Zhongshan. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



An LED screen displays the image of a dragon in a shopping center in Wuhan, Hubei province, on Jan 24. ZHANG CHANG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Children, wearing festive costumes, welcome the arrival of the Year of the Dragon in Huangshan, Anhui province, on Jan 24. SHI YALEI / FOR CHINA DAILY



People participate in an ice dragon boat race in Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui autonomous region, on Jan 13. LI XULUN / FOR CHINA DAILY



Seventy-four-year-old Wei Lamei welcomes the Lunar New Year with her hand-made dragon-shaped puppets in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, on Jan 25. ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

TREND

Young travelers prioritize places that make a good impression

By ZHANG YI
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Stamp collecting has recently emerged as a fresh and innovative approach for young people to document their travels, and many have been driven by the hobby, which offers a strong sense of interactivity and ceremony, to explore more attractions.

Instead of merely capturing photos with famous landmarks, enthusiasts of this new trend eagerly explore every nook and cranny of various attractions, museums, and shops during their journeys in search of a diverse array of stamps.

They imprint the stamps, usually with single or multicolored pictures of the scenic spots, names of the places, profiles of famous people or cultural relics, on postcards or in travel journals or commemorative albums, thereby creating a unique keepsake of their travels.

Free or paid, each stamp serves as a tangible representation of the visitor's presence at that specific location, becoming a cherished part of their memories. Furthermore, it has facilitated the discovery of hidden gems and unique travel experiences at destinations.

Kuang Zhaoxin, a 25-year-old designer, is an avid traveler and has been passionate about scrapbooking for over six years. She enjoys sketching and painting, using the book as a means to record memories from her travels.

Early last year, during one of her trips, she encountered stamp collecting and decided to incorporate it into her travel journal. Before each trip, she researches stamp-collecting strategies on social media. During a two-day trip to Beijing, she collected over 80 stamps.

Kuang particularly admires the beautifully crafted replica artifact stamps found in museums. She said that impressing these into her journal and then recording memories from the museums creates a strong sense of connection.

"It actually leaves a trace, a sense of ceremony. It serves as a great way to record the trip. When you see a particular exhibit and then happen to collect a stamp of the exhibit, looking back, you'll marvel at how beautiful it was and recall how impressive the exhibit was," she said.

Kuang also enjoys purchasing postcards, impressing them with distinctive local stamps, adding well-wishes, and then sending them to her friends.

While collecting stamps, she said she noticed that the majority of stamp collectors are young women and teenagers, and there is also a social aspect to it, whereby friends exchange the stamps they've collected, creating a form of cultural communication.



Visitors dressed in *hanfu*, or traditional Han Chinese costume, collect stamps at a special exhibition about the Tang Dynasty (618-907) at Xi'an Museum in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, in February last year. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Stamps of Approval



Figurines are used to decorate a stamp-collecting spot to draw tourists at a Xinhua Bookstore in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. DENG XIAOWEI / FOR CHINA DAILY



Visitors impress stamps on a souvenir puzzle at Shenyang Imperial Palace Museum in Shenyang, Liaoning province, in November. LIU BAOCHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

According to a travel consumption trend report released last year by Tongcheng Travel, a travel agency based in Jiangsu province, stamp-inspired content has gained significant popularity on various travel platforms since September, sparking a new trend in travel consumption.

During the long vacation over the Mid-Autumn Festival and National Day holidays last year, it ranked as the second most popular travel-related keyword online.

Attractions and destinations design related activities to engage visitors, such as organizing stamp exchange events and stamp-col-

lecting challenges, thereby attracting more young travelers.

On various online social platforms, users share their stamp-collecting experiences, discussing where to obtain stamps for free, which locations offer the widest variety of stamps, and where collectors can avoid long queues.

Shi Junchu, 29, from Yunnan province, came across stamp collecting three years ago while traveling in Wuhan, Hubei province. She found it to be a better way of commemorating her travels than purchasing souvenirs, so she carries a specially prepared notebook for collecting stamps whenever she travels.

Before planning her travel routes, she checks stamp-collecting strategies on social media and considers whether the activity is feasible for her itinerary. After concluding her travels, she shares her own strategies on social media.

She has filled six notebooks with stamps. Some of the intricate and delicate examples require multiple impressions to be pieced together into a bigger picture. She once waited in line for an hour and a half for a particular stamp.

"Stamp collecting has added more meaning to my travels. Flipping through those notebooks feels somewhat like looking at photos. I can recall what happened back then just by turning to a page — what delicious food I had, and what fun experiences I enjoyed," she said.

"This habit has improved my understanding of the historical and cultural aspects of various places, because when I collect stamps, I visit the attractions, some of which I wouldn't have visited in the past. I also delve into the stories behind each stamp," she added.

Shi's favorite set comes from the Yonghe Lama Temple in Beijing, consisting of 16 stamps. Collectors need to visit different halls within the temple to obtain the stamps, and each of the designs corresponds to the architecture of the respective halls.

"In the process of searching for these stamps, I toured almost the entire scenic area. I don't usually pay much attention to buildings, but these stamps have made me focus more on their architectural facades," she recalled.

Introducing stamp services has also become a way for many businesses to attract foot traffic. After stamp-collecting enthusiasts learn about these services on online platforms, they visit the stores, generally requiring a minimum purchase before being able to obtain stamps for "free".

Shi said that when strolling in scenic areas, she prioritizes visiting stores where she can collect stamps.

She currently operates a private museum in Kunming. Since last October, she has also introduced stamp-collecting services to encourage more visitors to explore the museum.

Gong Jian, deputy head of the Wuhan Branch of the China Tourism Academy, told China News Service that stamp-collecting activities in various parts of China are flourishing, enhancing the participation and experiential enjoyment of tourists.

In the era of social media, tourists are keen to share their collecting strategies with others through internet platforms, making offline check-ins and online dissemination an effective way of cultural and tourism promotion, Gong said.

He suggested that, in light of this trend, scenic spots should also strengthen the integration of tourism with culture and education in order to enhance the quality of their products.

By ZHANG YI in Beijing and LIU MINGTAI in Changchun

During this year's winter vacation and Spring Festival, many people from Taiwan have traveled to the Chinese mainland, especially to experience the trendy Northeast China ice and snow tours, an experience not available in Taiwan.

Lee Chiao-an, from Taipei and a student studying at National Chengchi University, recently visited Jilin province for five days with some other friends from Taiwan. They learned to make fish skin necklaces and experienced activities such as skiing and admiring the rime.

One of the activities that left a deep impression on her was the local traditional activity of ice fishing on the frozen surface of Chagan Lake.

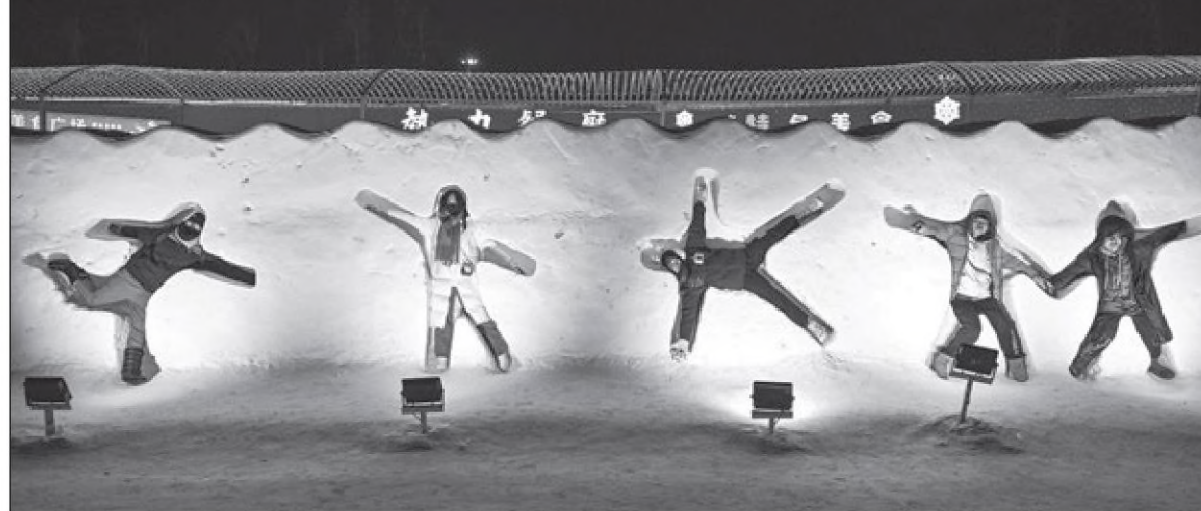
"This is my first visit to such a cold place. The freshly caught fish is surprisingly heavy — an interesting experience indeed," she said.

Chen Chiu-ching, currently studying at Nanjing Normal University, who also visited Northeast China this winter, said: "Exploring the diverse history and culture of the mainland has opened my eyes to aspects I never knew before."

"I've been to Harbin in Heilongjiang province before, but standing on the thick ice this time is a new experience for me."

"The climate and cuisine here are vastly different from Taiwan, offering me a wealth of new experiences," she said.

An ice reason to cross the Strait



Members of a winter camp for Taiwan students pose for the camera inside body shapes carved into a wall of snow during their visit to Shulan, Jilin province, last month. CHEN YEJUA / XINHUA

In a recent Taiwan television program introducing the popularity of traveling to Harbin, Tsai Cheng-yuan, a renowned Taiwan commentator, said he also harbors a desire to visit Harbin during this year's Spring Festival to see the ice sculptures and

taste local specialties. Recently, going to Northeast China to experience the charm of ice and snow has become a hot trend, attracting many tourists from the southern parts of China.

They have been affectionately

dubbed *nanfang xiaotudou* or "little southern potatoes" due to their relatively small stature compared to people in the north.

A viral video featuring a little girl from Taiwan, who goes by the nickname "little danggui", expressing

her desire to visit the popular tourist city of Harbin, has gained widespread popularity online. Netizens warmly welcomed her to come and visit.

Danggui, usually referring to the herb *Angelica sinensis*, can also be

interpreted literally as "the one who should return".

This cute nickname has sparked discussions and a trend among people online from different regions using local characteristics to refer to themselves.

In the recent trending video, the little girl and her mother have an interesting conversation.

When the girl expresses her desire to visit Harbin, her mother tells her that she would be called "little pineapple", which is a specialty of Taiwan.

However, the girl responds: "Daddy said I am not little pineapple, but little *danggui*".

Chen Binhua, spokesman for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, said no matter what they are called, children from Taiwan and the Chinese mainland are all Chinese children, and will undoubtedly be loved and warmly welcomed.

This winter, the unique charms of the ice and snow in northern China have attracted many Taiwan compatriots, especially children, he said, adding that, "we warmly welcome our friends from Taiwan to visit the Chinese mainland more often."

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Online
Watch the video
by scanning
the code.

BIZ LIFE

Nanxun leads by example in biz transformation

Technology, policy support help district embrace upgrades in its traditional wood industry

By LI JIAYING in Beijing and MA ZHENHUAN in Hangzhou

At a workshop of Zhejiang Onsense Home Technology Co, there is a complete absence of sawdust and the pungent smell of paint.

This is because the wooden furniture maker from Nanxun district of Huzhou in East China's Zhejiang province has opted for water-based paint for its natural wooden tiles, replacing traditional oil-based ones. Currently, water-based paint tiles form around 95 percent of the company's product portfolio.

"We have opted for water-based paint for our wood tiles due to its environmentally friendly attributes, which have increasingly found favor among consumers," said company Chairman Gu Guohua.

Similarly, at a workshop of Nanxun-based Treessun Flooring Co Ltd, it is hard to find any traces of wood dust in its production line.

The company has installed dust collection devices across its entire production line, from wood cutting to slotting and polishing, where collected sawdust is repurposed into biomass fuel, transforming waste into valuable resources and producing energy-efficient as well as eco-friendly wood tiles with high added value, said the company.

The application of green manufacturing technologies and supportive policies are part of Nanxun district's efforts to steadfastly embrace a green paradigm in its traditional wood manufacturing industry.

Nanxun now has one green industrial park, 10 green factories, six green supply chains and 13 green design products of national level, said the district government.

The strategic green upgrade has helped the district carve out a new path for the development of the local wood manufacturing and home furnishing industry.

As the most representative traditional industry in Nanxun, wood manufacturing has evolved over four decades into a pillar industry, with the overall industry value reaching over 11.3 billion yuan (\$1.57 billion) in 2023 and 15 local enterprises exceeding 100 million yuan in annual output value, according to the latest data from Nanxun's development and reform bureau.

Nanxun, known as the "Capital of Wood Tiles", took to the path of manufacturing tiles made of natural wood in the late 1980s. It now accounts for about 65 percent of the country's production of natural wood tiles and has emerged as China's largest wood tile base, characterized by highly concentrated



Above: A worker operates on a production line of export-bound tiles in Nanxun district of Huzhou, Zhejiang province, in August 2020.

Below: Workers transport wooden tiles at the workshop of Treessun Flooring Co Ltd in Nanxun district of Huzhou in March 2020.

PHOTOS BY LU ZHIPENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



trated brand clusters, a complete industrial chain and significant industry influence.

During the past few years, with consumers increasingly prioritizing quality of life and shifting market dynamics, over half of Nanxun's tile enterprises have embarked on a transformative journey into the field of home furnishings.

The companies have diversified production to include wooden doors, cabinets, wardrobes, bookshelves and other home decor products, offering consumers a diverse range of choices and one-

stop home decoration services.

For example, Furom Carpentry, another Nanxun-based wood enterprise, is targeting the high-end full-house customization market, covering research and development, production, sales and after-sales services.

"We plan to launch self-developed 3D texture carving technology for wooden furniture by the end of this year, which is expected to drive technological breakthroughs for the high-end full-house furnishing sector," said Yao Jianfeng, chairman of the company.

Last year, the output value of Nanxun's full-house furniture sector stood at 2.35 billion yuan, up 10.8 percent year-on-year, according to data from Nanxun's development and reform bureau.

"The full-house furniture sector has stood out as a new growth driver for Nanxun's wood industry despite a challenging real estate sector and sluggish export performance in 2023," said Huang Hua, an official with the bureau.

Vibrant private sector

The market vitality of Nanxun's

wood industry also stems from its burgeoning private sector.

"The local economy is pretty much all about the private sector," Huang said. "Among the over 900 companies above a designated size (20 million yuan in main business revenue) in Nanxun, only two are not privately owned."

As the most vibrant market entity in Huzhou, the private sector currently contributes to over 70 percent of the city's GDP, more than 70 percent of its technological innovation and new product development, over 80 percent of tax revenue and exports, and about 90 percent of employment opportunities, said the municipal government.

Riding on the national policy of boosting the growth of the private economy, Huzhou introduced its own guideline on promoting the private sector in October, encompassing 39 specific initiatives across 10 dimensions.

These measures aim to promote fair market competition, support the expansion of investment fields, intensify efforts to cultivate key economic entities, boost corporate transformation and upgrading, optimize policy support and foster a robust business environment, said the Huzhou municipal government.

The guideline came after China strategically prioritized the private sector as a key driver of economic growth in July, when the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council, or China's Cabinet, jointly issued a guideline on boosting the growth of the private economy.

In December, the annual tone-set-

ting Central Economic Work Conference reiterated that the nation will implement a number of measures to strengthen private enterprises, including better market access, access to factors of production, fair law enforcement, and protection of rights and interests, as well as further promote the internal driving force and innovation vitality of private enterprises.

"For the robust growth of the private economy, it is imperative to create a high-standard business environment, which calls for the establishment of a pragmatic, efficient, and service-oriented government that is committed to reform and innovation," said Huang Jianhui, a member of the think tank committee under the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce.

Eying sustained growth, the national wood hub of Nanxun will further promote the industrial upgrading of its private companies engaged in traditional industries, which have undergone challenges during recent years due to economic downturns, Huang said.

More supportive guidelines are on the way, covering locally specialized sectors such as electric motors and elevators in addition to wood manufacturing, he added.

"The local government will offer the best of its resources, policies and services in unwavering support to attract more design talent and teams to integrate themselves into Nanxun's development," Wen Jianfei, Party head of the district, said previously.

For instance, the district government has been striving to reinforce the brand image of Nanxun wood manufacturing as a whole by actively taking part in global industry events.

At the carpets and floor coverings expo Domotex in Hanover, Germany, in January, seven wood companies from Nanxun reaped substantial rewards.

"We hope to tap into the European market through this exhibition, where we have also gained a better knowledge of cutting-edge products and technologies, broadening our international perspective," said Ni Yuezhong, president of Zhejiang Shiyou Timber Co Ltd.

Previously focused on the domestic market, the company's participation in the expo contributed to increased sales and influence in the global market, with intended orders reaching about \$1 million during the event, Ni said.

As physical exhibitions make a comeback, companies are utilizing various events and trade activities to engage with existing clients, forge new connections and expand market presence.

More such activities can be expected to facilitate market expansion and new orders, actively helping local enterprises secure more domestic and international exhibition resources, the district government said.

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Vinegar adds culinary heft to county in Shanxi

By LI JIAYING

People in Shanxi province love mature vinegar so much that they would rather lose their heads than pots full of the traditional Chinese condiment, said Wang Junting, a tour guide from the province.

The locally produced vinegar, which usually takes 12 months to several years to mature, carries a special aroma as it ages and has high levels of acidity, adding a delightful tanginess and depth of flavor to Chinese dumplings. In fact, it is often considered a good choice for the traditional dish during Spring Festival.

Along with Shanxi's mature vinegar, Chinkiang vinegar from Zhejiang province, Baoning vinegar from Sichuan province and Yongchun vinegar from Fujian province, are known as the "Four Famous Chinese Vinegars" worldwide.

"As Spring Festival approaches, our production line, packaging workshop and logistics center are busier than usual. Our employees are working hard to meet the increased demand for the holiday market," said Luo Guodong, deputy general manager of Zilin Vine-

gar, based in Qingxu county of Taiyuan, Shanxi.

With over 1,000 mu (66.7 hectares) of wetlands and 1,700 mu of lakes, the locally cultivated red sorghum of Qingxu helps nurture the unique, rich and soft texture of its mature vinegar.

The county is one of the key food vinegar production bases in China, with a burgeoning industry led by local enterprises such as Shanxi Shuita Vinegar Co Ltd, Zilin Vinegar, Meijin Vinegar and Donghu Vinegar.

One may, however, find it hard to link Shanxi's vinegar brands with the county of their original birthplace.

This has made the establishment of a cultural connection between mature vinegar and Qingxu a key step in its future industrial upgrade.

At Baoyuan Superior Mature Vinegar Workshop, which is built in ancient architectural style, workers in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) costumes employ wooden barrels, baskets and shovels to show visitors authentic and traditional vinegar brewing techniques such as hand milling, fermentation and filtration.

As China's first vinegar culture

6.5 billion yuan
annual output value of Qingxu's vinegar industry in 2023

museum, the workshop under Shanxi Shuita Vinegar attracts over 400,000 visitors a year, with annual revenue from ticket sales exceeding 20 million yuan (\$2.8 million).

Shanxi Shuita Vinegar has also invested more than 800 million yuan in the establishment of a nearly 400-mu vinegar park in the county, the company said.

Digitalization has also become significant for the time-honored industry's modern upgrade, with an increasing number of high-quality vinegar brands making forays into global markets through livestreaming platforms.

Jointly established by the Qingxu county government, Alibaba Cloud Innovation Center and Meijin Vinegar, a "rural e-town" for Shanxi's mature vinegar officially opened last year, and serves as a comprehensive platform for e-commerce

talent training, livestreaming sales and big data service command center, said the county government.

A "rural e-town" refers to a development platform within a specific region, and is based on specialized sector growth, with deep integration of e-commerce at its core and supported by complementary services.

"Leveraging the internet and cutting-edge brewing technologies, we will tailor our vinegar products to the differentiated tastes of various countries and regions. We aim to meet the diverse needs of consumers across the globe and enhance the brand image of Qingxu as China's Vinegar Capital," said Wang Jianyun, chief engineer at Meijin Vinegar.

Qingxu's vinegar products are exported to 36 countries and regions, leading to an annual output value of 6.5 billion yuan and creating nearly 100,000 jobs in 2023, said the county's industry and information bureau.

With 81 vinegar-related enterprises and three nationally renowned trademarks, Qingxu boasts an annual vinegar production capacity of 800,000 metric tons, accounting



A worker brews mature vinegar at a production base of Shanxi Shuita Vinegar Co Ltd in Qingxu county of Taiyuan, Shanxi province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

for about 80 percent of the province's output and 20 percent of the national total, and ranking first in the country for regional vinegar production and sales, according to the bureau.

Qingxu will keep advancing the transformation and upgrade of its traditional sectors and the cultivation of emerging categories in the

mature vinegar industry, said Li Fugui, governor of Qingxu, in a previous interview.

Through measures such as restructuring and integrating companies of different sizes, the county will cultivate an industry development cluster to enhance the overall quality and market competitiveness of the local vinegar industry, Li said.

TRAVEL

Editor's note: Modern technology is being used for the protection of cultural relics and to create new ways of popularizing the country's cultural heritage.

IT expert finds true calling among frescoes

Fahai Temple Mural Art Center uses digital tools to take visitors on an immersive journey in Beijing

By DU JUAN
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The Fahai Temple, located at the southern foot of Cuiwei Mountain in the western part of Beijing, houses Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) frescoes dating back nearly 600 years.

Today, a brand-new art center has been built at the foot of the mountain, where visitors can immerse themselves in a digitalized journey of discovery.

"By utilizing modern technology, valuable digital assets have been created, allowing the 'dormant' frescoes to come to life," says Liu Xiaobo, curator of the Fahai Temple Mural Art Center.

The center represents the accumulation of years of exploration and preservation of the cultural relics in Beijing's Shijingshan district where it is located.

Fahai Temple was first built in 1439 during the reign of Zhengtong in Ming Dynasty. It is noted for its frescoes, and is known as one of the "three major fresco sites in China" together with the murals found in Dunhuang of Gansu province and Yongle Palace in Yuncheng, Shanxi province.

"The frescoes depict 77 figures, including men, women, the elderly, children, Buddhas and bodhisattvas, each with different postures and expressions, still vibrant in color after nearly 600 years," says Liu, who is an enthusiast of murals and ancient architecture.

"I have read so many books and visited numerous temples to see murals. The murals in Fahai Temple are among the best," Liu says.

"These exquisite frescoes originated from the imperial court were completed by 15 artists who were led by the royal painter Wan Fuqing. They employed traditional techniques that render the frescoes with vivid effect."

The most exquisite depiction is one of the goddess Guanyin draped in a white gauzy garment and adorned with clusters of six-petal flowers. Each petal was composed of 48 threads of gold, as delicate as spider silk and as thin as cicada wings, shining brilliantly and astonishing to behold.

Despite the brilliance of this Ming Dynasty fresco art, it did not maintain its splendor throughout history. With the demise of the dynasty, its prosperity came to an abrupt end.

In 1937, the British journalist Angela Latham published her experience of visiting Fahai Temple in the Illustrated London News, bringing the silent Fahai Temple back into public view.

Currently, the original frescoes are being protected and opened to the public in a controlled manner. Visits



An audience watches a movie based on the murals of Fahai Temple in a 3D cinema in the art center in May 2023. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Visitors turn their hands to making murals with traditional methods at the Fahai Temple Mural Art Center in December 2023. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

are arranged by appointment, with each viewing session limited to about 20 minutes. Visitors can only use cold light sources throughout the visit, allowing the original frescoes to "rest" more.

In recent years, the rapid devel-

opment of a high-tech industry featuring technology services, digital creativity and new-generation information in the area has given the Shijingshan district government more confidence in the digital display of the frescoes.

The Fahai Temple Mural Art Center was officially opened to public on Jan 18 last year, with Liu, who has seen numerous frescoes and many architectural and artistic treasures abroad, becoming the curator of the center.

As curator, he completed the planning of the four-hour digital content for center's exhibition.

At the exhibition of Fahai Temple Mural Art Center, the original scale of mural paintings is presented with a 4K HD display. Each one of the 77 figures is portrayed with immaculate attention to detail by 3D modeling at the pixel-level.

The facial details of Water-moon Avalokitesvara, one of the most representative figures on the frescoes of Fahai Temple, are hard to make out in dim conditions. However, after 3D modeling, the figure's face, which is over 3 meters high, can be seen clearly on the 4K HD screen at the Mural Hall in the basement of the art center.

"Through technological means, we magnify and zoom in to show specific details and introduce the content of

the frescoes item by item, offering the audience ample time to understand the frescoes," Liu explained.

"We have also introduced nearly a hundred domestic and foreign cultural relics and cave data for comparison with the Fahai Temple frescoes, enabling the audience to gain a clearer and more intuitive understanding of the origins and influence of frescoes here."

With the completion of the art center, visitors can enjoy a fun and immersive experience that illuminates the life and times in which the frescoes were created and rediscovered.

The art center invited students from a middle school in Beijing to celebrate the Spring Festival in the center. They performed dances and learned about the mural culture.

"Whenever I see a visitor lingering in front of a screen in the art center, watching the content for a long time, I feel particularly happy, and I believe everything is meaningful," Liu says.

Liu's story is also expressive. He used to be an IT programmer and

reached a high position in an IT company. His love for ancient architecture and cultural relics, especially frescoes, led him to visit almost all the grotto temples in China. In time, he left his previous career and embarked on a brand-new path in history and culture.

He said the colored sculptures in the hall of Xiaoxitian Temple in Xixian county in Shanxi province had a tremendous impact on him when he first visited there in 2014.

"I never expected that such a remote place, such an unknown cultural relic, could be so magnificent," Liu says.

Since 2016, he has been a volunteer guide at several museums in Beijing, attracting numerous fans with his expertise and erudition. At the end of 2021, the Shijingshan district approached Liu and asked him to take on the curation work for the digital exhibition of Fahai Temple.

Later on, he became the curator of the center, gradually realizing his dream fueled by his love for ancient relics.

Technology revives some of the capital's lost cultural treasures

By DU JUAN

The "Three Mountains and Five Gardens" represent the rich cultural and historical heritage of Beijing. Primarily serving as leisure retreats where the imperial family could relax and entertain, they are now treasured as sites of natural beauty as well as repositories of the nation's historical and cultural heritage.

The Three Mountains are the Fragrant Hills, Jade Spring Hill and Longevity Hill. The Five Gardens are Jingming Garden, Jingyi Garden, Qingyi Garden (The Summer Palace), Changchun Garden and Yuanmingyuan (The Old Summer Palace).

Many important cultural items that were housed in the Three Mountains and Five Gardens were lost during the ravaging of the sites by Western colonialist forces. But recently, 69 important long-lost cultural relics have been recreated in digital form and are now being presented to the public.

This is a phased achievement of the "Three Mountains and Five Gardens Dispersed Cultural Relics Three-dimensional Database Construction Project", led by Wu Xiaomin, the director of the Yuanmingyuan Research Center at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

The completion of these 69 digital cultural relic models is the result



An autumn view of the Fragrant Hills Park in Beijing. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

of collaborative efforts involving many volunteers and patriots both at home and abroad.

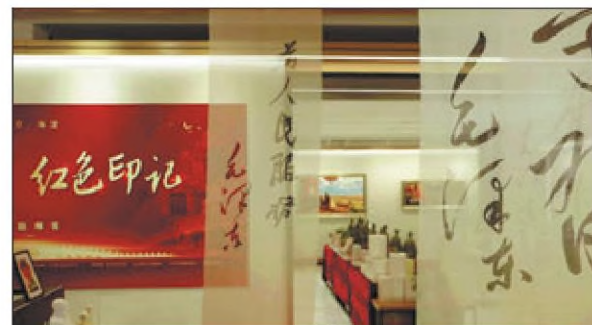
"We reached out to scholars and artists studying in France, as well as overseas students, to help us gather information about the dispersed cultural relics," Wu says.

The project has created a digital museum that provides a comprehensive and systematic exhibition of dispersed cultural relics in seven categories. Each artifact is accompanied by a corresponding mini-program. Leveraging technologies such as virtual reality, the exhibition hall offers visitors a unique experience of virtual roaming and close-up appreciation of the items.

"For accessible artifacts, we

employ physical scanning and measurements for restoration. For items that cannot be surveyed on-site, we manually create models based on extant photos, striving to authentically reproduce details such as texture and material," Wu says. "The results have been very successful."

On top of restoring artifacts, digital technology enhances the visitor experience. Take for example the "Forty Scenes of Yuanmingyuan". Due to its two-dimensional nature, the flat presentation of scanned images lacked appeal. Therefore Wu's team leveraging their expertise in ancient architecture, recreated the three-dimensional landscapes depicted in the



An exhibition titled "Red Memories of Three Mountains and Five Gardens" is held at Dayou Library in Beijing from Jan 3 to 17. PENG JIACHANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

two-dimensional paintings, providing viewers with a more enthralling immersive experience.

To reach a bigger audience, the digital museum team is also organizing offline touring exhibitions.

Database construction is not the endpoint. Cao Jinsong, the director of the Haidian District Cultural Development Promotion Center, expressed his hope that this database, initially funded by the government, can be utilized by more cultural and creative enterprises to generate cultural products.

Regarding the development of cultural and creative products, Wu believes that it is essential to infuse artistic inspiration into the artifacts.

"We are no longer adhering to traditional presentation methods. Instead, we are blending the form and meaning of cultural relics into contemporary lifestyles and fashion sensibilities, breathing new vitality into the dispersed relics," Wu says.

For instance, after its digital recreation, a bronze phoenix weather vane that is still missing to this day, is being transformed into "Phoenix Xiaoyuan", a digital avatar that will act as a virtual tour guide for visitors.

Digital methods have enriched the ways traditional culture is being encountered and appreciated.

"Cultural self-confidence is premised on cultural awareness. People need to understand the cultural

treasures of their own nation. The digital museum provides an opportunity that not only showcases the forms of artifacts but also allows the audience to grasp the stories and significance behind them," Cao says.

Apart from the dispersed cultural relics database, Haidian district has also utilized artificial intelligence to restore a batch of old photos, which are showcased in the "Red Memories of Three Mountains and Five Gardens" themed exhibition at Dayou Library from Jan 3 to 17, aiming to spread the "red spirit" behind the photos.

"It gathers the significant historical theme of 'journeying to Beijing for the imperial examination', and through a visible, tangible and sensory approach, it promotes our red culture and revolutionary spirit," says Yu Pelli, deputy director of the Haidian District Cultural Development Promotion Center.

However, the construction of the database is not an easy task. Wu explained that there are over a million dispersed cultural relics, but the location of only a few hundred has been confirmed. It is hard to ascertain the fate of those whose whereabouts is unknown as some may have been melted down or destroyed.

Yang Zishuo contributed to this story.

SPORTS

BASEBALL



Members of the Deokjeok High School baseball team run on a beach during a practice session on the remote Deokjeok island off the coast of Incheon, South Korea. The island was struggling to attract and retain young people until a baseball academy was established by Kim Hak-yong, a prominent figure of the game in South Korea. Now the academy, which offers regular classes and specialized training, has dozens of students who have traveled from the mainland to pursue their major-league dreams. REUTERS

A DREAM DESTINATION



Lee Tae-hyeon, a member of the Deokjeok High School baseball team, rakes sand at the academy's training ground. REUTERS



Isolated island becomes unlikely breeding ground for future stars



A map of Deokjeok island is displayed at a port on Deokjeok island in Incheon, South Korea. REUTERS



Members of the Deokjeok High School team "stack hands" in the huddle during a game at the 51st Bonghwang High School Baseball Tournament. REUTERS

Dreaming of making it big in baseball, teenage brothers An Seung-han and An Seung-young traveled hundreds of miles from home to remote Deokjeok island, where the sport and their team are now the closest thing they have to a family.

The boys are among a few dozen teenagers who have left the bright lights of some of South Korea's biggest cities to join a specialized sports academy set up by Kim Hak-yong, former manager of the elite Dongguk University team that has produced numerous players for the national KBO major league.

"If I work hard here, I can be a starting player, so I'm working even harder. If I keep doing well, I can also become a professional baseball player," 16-year-old Seung-young, the younger brother, said during a training session.

In addition to helping the boys achieve their dreams, the sports academy has breathed life into Deokjeok, which was struggling to retain, and attract, young people, just like many other rural areas in the world's most rapidly aging society.

The island has a population of 1,800 people, a majority of whom are elderly. Last year, it was on the brink of losing its only school under a nationwide school board guideline that stipulates closures if the number of students falls below 60.

That has now changed, thanks to Kim and his friend Chang Kwang-ho, manager of the Deokjeok High School baseball team.

"The players who come here come with an amazing mindset. You don't come here unless you're willing to give up everything," said Chang.

Although the island is less than two hours away from the city of Incheon, it remains quite isolated from the mainland, and is much less developed.

Humble beginnings

Kim and Chang set up their baseball academy in 2022, offering both regular classes and specialized training. After starting out with just 28 students, 13 more joined in 2023, and the school team has already made it to the round of 16 in the prestigious Golden Lion tournament.

"These players want to play in the professional league and that's what we're trying to get them to do," said Chang, a former KBO catcher and coach.

"We're hoping to send a couple of players to professional teams next year," he added.

Part of the team's success can be attributed to the relatively generous funding they receive from local grants that compensate for the dredging of sand off the island's shore, which is crucial to construction projects in Seoul, Chang said.

Some residents, however, begrudge this money going to outsiders. Others, however, have welcomed the influx of fresh faces.

"We're happy to have students here. It's so much better to have more students coming because we are worried that the number of young people keeps decreasing," said 82-year-old resident Kim In-soon.

Deokjeok is the largest of the Ongjin islands and its population has shrunk considerably from the more than 12,000 residents in the 1950s, a fate shared by almost 500 of the more than 3,400 islands that are still inhabited.

For players like the An brothers, being in such a remote place means there is little else to do.

"All we have is the field and the ball and baseball, so it can get pretty boring, but I think it helps us focus on our goal," said An Seung-han, the older brother and a starting pitcher who is a year away from graduation.



The multipurpose sports field used for the Deokjeok High School team's practice sessions on Deokjeok island. REUTERS



Bang Jun-young, a member of the Deokjeok High School baseball team, naps during an English class. REUTERS



Members of the Deokjeok High School baseball team run on a beach during a practice session on Deokjeok island. REUTERS

SPORTS

By SHI FUTIAN
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What was your bravest decision in 2023? For Olympic champion Ye Shiwen, the answer was returning to the demanding world of elite swimming. While some wondered if she could even continue her pool career, the 27-year-old proved all the doubters wrong by reaching the highest step on the podium at last year's Hangzhou Asian Games. And Ye believes her triumphant return is just the start of a new golden chapter.

"In terms of how I handled everything mentally, I would give myself full marks for 2023. But physically speaking, especially in terms of swimming technique, there are still many things to improve. I think I could have performed better in many races," said Ye, who won 200m breaststroke gold in Hangzhou in September, during an exclusive interview with China Daily online show *On Your Marks*.

"At the start of 2023, my goal was clear — to return to the pool for the Hangzhou Asian Games. It offered me a chance to win gold at home, and I have achieved what we planned.

"How much further can I push myself in the pool? Right now I don't have the exact answer. Before returning this time, I was just thinking about the Asian Games at first, but after the journey to achieve my goal in Hangzhou, now I believe that the Asian Games can be the start of a new chapter in my career and I plan to keep swimming."

Ye was one of China's brightest swimming stars when she won the 200m and 400m individual medley gold medals at the 2012 London Olympics at the age of 16. However, the teenager struggled to maintain those exceptional standards in the ensuing years and failed to reach the podium at the 2016 Rio Games.

In 2017, Ye decided to step away from the pool to focus on her academic goals at Tsinghua University. After a year, though, she put her law-school studies on hold and returned to the pool.

At the 2019 FINA World Championships in Gwangju, South Korea, Ye pocketed two silvers, but then missed the Tokyo Games. After the national games in 2021, Ye stepped away from the pool for a second time to resume her studies at Tsinghua.

"The pool holds a special attraction for me, and I think that's the charm of competitive sports. When I studied at Tsinghua, I just couldn't help but to come to the pool to swim for one or two hours a day. If I didn't, I would feel that something was not right," said Ye.

"There were pressures of schoolwork at university, and the best way for me to ease that pressure was to jump into the pool. When I was in the water, I just felt comfortable. It always feels like I enter a world of my own. And in that world I can fight to win something, and have that sense of achievement."

The encouragement of her coach, Wei Wei, helped Ye dispel her doubts and make a definitive decision to return to competition.

"At that time, she had not trained for over a year. I said to her that the Asian Games would be staged at home after her graduation. I asked her if she wanted to return to the pool again, and fight again for her dream. And in a way, she could contribute to her home as a Hangzhou native," coach Wei told China Daily.

"I always believed she has what it takes to be a top swimmer. She took some time to consider everything and we discussed things a little more, and then she made the decision to return. Initially, when she returned, we had the mindset of 'just give it a go'. But later on, it



NOT AFRAID TO GET BACK IN THE WATER

Comeback queen Ye Shiwen happy to have trusted her instincts following triumphant return to pool



turned out that she regained her momentum."

Growing through study

Compared to when she won the Olympic medals a decade ago, Ye believes she has grown a lot to become a much more mature athlete. And she reckons her time at Tsinghua has been key to that.

"The best lesson that I ever learned at university was how to think independently. When I was younger, I didn't have to think about anything, as the coaches would prepare every training session and arrange all the races for me. All I needed to do was to follow and execute their plans," Ye added.

"But, at Tsinghua, I need to have the habit of thinking for myself. That is also crucial for me now in swimming. Now I think more about my own training plans, or what new tactics I can try. As a swimmer who is not that young, I need to think how to better adjust my body."

Life at Tsinghua, however, was not easy for Ye. To achieve better grades, she would record her morning classes and watch them again at night. She also managed to squeeze in one or two hours of swimming each day in order to maintain a basic level of fitness.

"We always kept in touch over the phone or through text messages when she was at school. I remember she told me that studying at law school was not like training in the pool, and it could be tough in a different way for her sometimes," coach Wei recalled.

"She told me that she needed to remember many things from her books and needed to watch recordings of her classes more than once to better comprehend them."

Coach Wei is confident that his student can succeed in many other areas away from the pool. He told China Daily that he will never forget when Ye first joined his team as a 6-year-old. Wei was deeply impressed by what he saw in the young girl's eyes — the determination of a future champion.

"When she was a kid, I used to always tell her that she had done a great job. But now she is too mature to need that kind of encouragement," Wei added.

"Now I always tell her not to set goals that are too high, and to not put too much pressure on herself. That she should just be happy in the pool. But, I know she wants to return to the top and prove herself once again."

Since starting her career in 2002 at the age of six, Ye has experienced peaks and troughs. By her own calculation, Ye told China Daily that she had spent 13,600 hours training in the pool over the past 21 years — and she's still not finished.

"Back in 2016 after the Rio Olympics, people suggested that it was maybe the time to quit. I did not have too many supporters around me telling me to keep swimming. But I just had that feeling that I still had what it takes to be at the top. So I kept returning," said Ye.

"Now, I meet a lot of swimmers who are a lot younger than me. Some of them were born in 2012, the year I won the Olympic gold. Looking at them, I think of the younger me. At their age, I was just fearless."

"If there was a time machine, and I could go back to meet the younger me, I would tell her to never fear defeat and to directly face up to your challenges, no matter what they are. And keep swimming, because this sport will bring you so many positive things in life."

Chinese swimming fans hope there are still more to come.

Olympic champion Ye Shiwen believes that the Hangzhou Asian Games was the start of a new chapter in her swimming career. XINHUA