

Strong momentum

Coca-Cola to keep investing in China after sales growth in 2023

BUSINESS, PAGE 9



Talk of China 'de-risking' is mostly rhetoric

WORLD USA, PAGE 7



Building bridges

Close bonds forged through thriving cultural exchanges in Saudi Arabia

Z WEEKLY, PAGE 14

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C919 planes net more new orders at air show

By ZHU WENQIAN
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China's domestically developed single-aisle passenger jet C919 netted 40 new orders from Tibet Airlines on the opening day of the Singapore Airshow on Tuesday, while its debut at an overseas air show signals the model's official entry into the global civil aircraft market, said an industry expert.

Tibet Airlines, a regional carrier based at Gonggar Airport in Lhasa, Xizang autonomous region, signed a deal with Commercial Aircraft Corp of China for 40 C919 aircraft in the plateau variant. The variant meets transportation requirements in high-altitude areas by shortening the fuselage and featuring high-altitude modifications.

"The C919 aircraft participated in an overseas air show for the first time, promoting its global sales. We hope that the model will gain new orders from overseas carriers," said Lin Zhijie, a civil aviation industry analyst.

So far, the C919, comparable with the narrow-body Airbus A320 and the Boeing B737 series, has netted more than 1,100 orders from home and abroad. Two C919 and three ARJ21 regional aircraft made their debut at the Singapore Airshow.

As the global air travel market continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, the C919 is expected to meet growing travel demand and break the market duopoly of Boeing and Airbus.

Tibet Airlines also signed an agreement with COMAC, the aircraft's manufacturer, for an order of 10 ARJ21 jetliners in the plateau variant.

The ARJ21 is China's first home-developed regional passenger jet, and the plateau variant has good crosswind resistance at high-altitude airports.

Currently, more than 110 ARJ21 aircraft are in commercial operation, with most operating at regional airports.

Meanwhile, Henan Civil Aviation Development and Investment Group signed an order with COMAC for six ARJ21 aircraft.

Airports located at an altitude above 1,500 meters and below 2,438 meters are considered high-altitude, and those at 2,438 meters

and above are ultra-high-altitude airports. Such airports face significant difficulties due to the high altitude and sparse oxygen.

High-altitude airports are mainly in China, Nepal, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador. Among the top 10 airports with the highest altitudes worldwide, China has eight, according to industry reports.

The C919's high-altitude variant has 140 to 160 seats, and its takeoff and landing performance meets the requirements of all ultra-high-altitude airports in China. The regular C919 passenger jet has 158 to 192 seats and a flying range of 4,075 to 5,555 kilometers, COMAC said.

"China boasts the world's biggest demand for high-altitude planes. The C919's plateau variant has a smaller passenger capacity, shorter fuselage and lighter weight. Corresponding modifications have been made to the engine and the oxygen system," Lin said. "The plateau variant is of great significance for meeting the travel demand of passengers in high-altitude regions of China," he added.

The Civil Aviation Administration of China has been implementing an initiative to better integrate regional connectivity with the trunk air travel market during the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) period.

"China should further promote the development of the regional aviation market and launch more regional routes, and build a group of specialized and scaled regional carriers," said Li Guijin, a professor at the Beijing-based Civil Aviation Management Institute of China.

The C919 aircraft made its first commercial flight in May 2023. So far, four C919 jets have been put into commercial operations by Shanghai-based China Eastern Airlines and they have handled more than 110,000 passenger trips.

All four C919 planes were put into operation during the Spring Festival travel rush, which started on Jan 26 and will conclude on Mar 5.

The planes operate on regular round-trip routes connecting Shanghai Hongqiao and Beijing Daxing international airports, as well as Shanghai Hongqiao and Chengdu Tianfu international airports in Chengdu, Southwest China's Sichuan province.



A Chinese-built C919 passenger jet sits on the tarmac for a static display during the Singapore Airshow on Tuesday. The air show kicked off on Tuesday and will run through Sunday. ROSLAN RAHMAN / AFP

Every morsel counts



Displaced Palestinians wait to receive food at a government school in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Monday. The United Nations World Food Programme said on Tuesday it was pausing deliveries of life-saving food aid to northern Gaza until conditions allow for safe distribution. MOHAMMED ABED / AFP

Proactive workers adapt to AI

White-collar, relatively high-paying jobs starting to feel the pinch of new technology

By CHENG SI
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The recently released artificial intelligence model Sora, created by research organization OpenAI, has caused a sensation in the tech sector with its ability to generate videos of up to a minute in length based on brief text instructions.

Inside

Some industry insiders said that Sora will bring revolutionary changes to content creation as well as the entertainment and education industries, while causing concern among regular workers about their future amid constantly improving AI technologies.

The quickly changing situation has prompted some employees to adapt through proactive steps to use AI in their work.

Generative AI, which allows enterprises to create new products

more quickly, may become a major, uncontrollable factor in the job market, and experts and industry insiders are advising the average worker to gain more digital working skills.

The online career networking platform LinkedIn said in a recent report that last year, generative AI affected more than 500 working skills worldwide, such as data analysis and visual content creation. The application of generative AI is projected to affect 65 percent of people's working skills by 2030, the report said.

Yang Jing, 32, an illustrator in Beijing, said that she and her colleagues are worried about their future. "We have been jittery since we watched online videos that showed AI tools being used to make superfast illustrations. News reports about AI replacing average workers in the near future are making us anxious."

She recalled that one of her friends who is an animator for a

gaming company in Beijing almost lost her job last year. "I can't say that AI has fundamentally changed our lives yet, but it is very likely to affect our careers in the future," she said.

Yang's fears are not unfounded. Many employers are showing a growing interest in AI, and job seekers with AI working skills are likely to gain more interview invitations.

According to recruitment portal Liepin, the number of job openings requiring AI-related skills rose by nearly 180 percent on the platform between January and October last year.

Li Qiang, vice-president of Zhaopin, another recruitment portal, said the employment market is currently dynamic, with new professions emerging and old ones being replaced because of technological advancements.

"Just like previous digital technology innovations replaced lower-

level, low-wage workers, the advent of large language model AI tools has a substitution effect on white-collar jobs, or relatively high-paying, knowledge-based, high-income jobs," Li said.

In July, Zhaopin and the National School of Development of Peking University jointly released a report that listed several professions expected to bear the brunt of AI, including financial auditing, interpretation and banking. On the other hand, workers involved in domestic services, catering and nursing face the lowest possibility of replacement.

For the first time, the development of AI tools is threatening to replace high-paying, white-collar jobs, instead of the labor-intensive jobs that were affected during previous technological revolutions, according to the Zhaopin report.

See AI, page 3

NATION HAS RIGHT INGREDIENTS FOR CULINARY SUCCESS

From caviar to olive oil, domestic 'specialty' food items are matching high-quality imports

By LI YINGXUE
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A school trip by 11 children from the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region to the chilly north last month has unwittingly opened the nation's eyes to homegrown food products assumed to be specialty imports.

Dressed in bright orange puffer

jackets to shield themselves from the cold in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, the children, ages 3 to 6, attracted media attention and were dubbed the "Little Sugar Oranges".

Seizing on the publicity opportunity, the Guangxi government sent locally grown sugar oranges to Harbin as a gesture of gratitude. In return, Heilongjiang generously sent 100,000 boxes of fresh cranberries to the region.

Many Chinese netizens were surprised to learn that Heilongjiang produced cranberries, triggering an online hunt for

specialty foods grown and produced in China.

From caviar originating from Zhejiang province's Qiandao Lake to crabs from the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region and grain-fed beef produced in Dalian, Liaoning province, they found a plethora of culinary gems.

See Delicacies, page 2

Russia-Ukraine conflict can only be resolved politically

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has been dragging on for two years, and the current situation on the battlefield remains a stalemate.

In February last year, on the one-year anniversary of the onset of the conflict, China issued "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis". The document set forth 12 stances: respecting the sovereignty of all countries, abandoning Cold War mentality, ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks, resolving the humanitarian crisis, protecting civilians and prisoners



of war, keeping nuclear power plants safe, reducing strategic risks, facilitating grain exports, stopping unilateral sanctions, keeping industrial and supply chains stable, and promoting post-conflict reconstruction.

One year later, the progress in politically resolving the Russia-

Ukraine conflict has been very limited, and the changes on the battlefield have been equally limited. This year the conflict, apart from causing more casualties and property damage, has seen almost no substantial change. According to data separately compiled by Russian and Ukrainian civil organizations, since the start of the conflict, Russian military casualties have exceeded 320,000, while Ukrainian military casualties are estimated at around 250,000.

The conflict has reached a dead-

lock because internally, the conflicting parties are locked in a zero-sum struggle over territorial disputes, while externally, NATO continues to provide military aid to Ukraine.

The focus of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has become an irreconcilable territorial dispute between the two countries. In October 2022, Russia declared that four occupied regions of eastern Ukraine — Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — are part of Russia.

See Conflict, page 3



INSIDE
South-South cooperation strengthened
Global Views, page 13

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PAGE TWO

From page 1

Thanks to advances in farming and agricultural technology, China's food producers are also trying out new production areas. Olive oil from Wudu district in Longnan, Gansu province, for example, is not only sold around the world, but has also won gold medals in international produce contests. And wine from Shangri-La in Yunnan province recently topped wine critic James Suckling's China Top 100 Wines 2023 list.

High-end products such as *foie gras* and caviar are also gradually breaking through geographical and price barriers and reaching ordinary people's dining tables.

Last month, the online platform Taobao shared a report on hidden local specialties. Gansu and the Inner Mongolia autonomous region are now churning out white shrimps, while Anhui, Sichuan, Yunnan and Fujian provinces are becoming known for their whiskeys, the report said.

Caviar exports

One-third of the global caviar market's total supply comes from Zhejiang, with Hangzhou Qiandao-hu Xunlong Sci-tech Development Co the main provider.

"Our 'Kaluga Queen' brand caviar has approximately 35 percent of the global market share and we are the supplier for the first-class cabins of airlines such as Lufthansa, Cathay Pacific and Singapore Airlines," said the company's general manager, Xia Yongtao.

The caviar, harvested from river sturgeon, has been selected by numerous Michelin three-star restaurants in Paris and New York and has also been served at international events such as the Oscars ceremony and the G20 Summit banquet in Hangzhou, Zhejiang.

"Since our establishment, our goal has been to export caviar because it's in high demand internationally," Xia said. From the first jar produced in 2006, Kaluga Queen caviar has gradually penetrated international markets. The company now exports to 45 countries and regions.

"We showcase the quality of our caviar at seafood exhibitions in Europe and invite French experts to our factory for inspections and guidance to help us produce even more delicious caviar," Xia said.

The company's aquaculture output ranks first globally, and Xia said they have plans to expand. "Our goal is to capture over 50 percent of the global market share in the next five years," he said.

Ninety percent of annual Kaluga Queen caviar production is for export, while the remainder is sold in China. Over the past 20 years domestic caviar sales have increased steadily, reaching 100 million yuan (\$13.9 million) in 2023, Xia said.

"The domestic market still has tremendous potential. At the moment, most high-end restaurants in China favor Kaluga Queen," Xia said. His next step is to expand the product into more midrange restaurants while continuing online sales, allowing more people in China to enjoy high-quality caviar.

"Through Tmall, our caviar goes straight from the source to the table, allowing consumers to enjoy it at a much lower price than in Michelin-starred restaurants. Our annual sales on Tmall now exceed tens of millions of yuan," he said.

A feast of progress

Innovative agricultural research is revolutionizing farming methods across China and expanding business opportunities.

Zhang Shiling is in charge of aquatic products at the online retail



Farmers pour harvested olives into a container for storage on Oct 12 at an olive cultivation base in Longnan, Gansu province. LANG BINGBING / XINHUA



From Left: Workers produce caviar on Jan 6, 2022, at a sturgeon breeding base in Quzhou, Zhejiang province. NIU JING / FOR CHINA DAILY Staff and volunteers sort premium cranberries on Jan 7 at a planting base in Fuyuan, Heilongjiang province. LI YONGJUN / XINHUA Hong Xing, a villager in the Diqing Tibetan autonomous prefecture, Yunnan province, invites friends to taste handmade wine in July 2021. LIU RANYANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



platform Dingdong Maicai. From Xinjiang crabs to Yellow River wetland crayfish, he provides consumers with their food requests despite seasonal challenges.

Last February, Zhang discovered a crayfish farm in Yellow River wetlands during his nationwide search for produce. Impressed by the crayfish's thin, clean shells, he introduced them to the market.

"The consumers love these crayfish," Zhang said. "They have a high repurchase rate because of their delicious taste — whether boiled or steamed — with sweet and fresh meat."

Every year, Zhang buys crabs from Jiangsu province, however, there are times of the year when they are unavailable. With the help of an agriculture institute, Zhang learned that crabs sourced from Xinjiang could fill the gap.

"In Xinjiang, they've learned crab farming techniques from Jiangsu. The crabs raised with snow water in the Tianshan Mountains have thinner shells and sweeter meat and are about 70 per-

cent of the price of Yangcheng Lake crabs," he said.

Zhang also noticed that in recent years, many places in China have started farming high-quality aquatic products such as South American white shrimp.

"Chinese consumers are trusting domestic aquaculture more and don't rely as much on imports. They also want domestic seafood to be fresher," Zhang added.

Xia, from the Hangzhou caviar company, said his company also relied heavily on technology to improve its product.

"In 1998, our founding team established the Sturgeon Breeding Technology Engineering Center of the Chinese Academy of Fishery Sciences," he said.

With the international ban on wild sturgeon fishing, Xia said his company saw an opportunity to fill the gap in the international market and in 2003 developed its caviar project.

One of the sturgeon species their team researched was the Kaluga, or river beluga, which can live up to 100 years and weigh 1 metric ton. "We

chose the name of this fish to name our caviar after," he said.

After scouting various locations for aquaculture, the company settled on Qiandao Lake. "We were impressed by its crystal-clear water and smooth surface during our first visit. The area also boasts excellent transportation and government support for technology transfer, making it an ideal choice in Zhejiang," he explained.

Xia and his team faced the challenge of Zhejiang's hot summers. They overcame the hurdle by pumping cold water from the depths of the lake to cool the fish farms. This improved survival rates of the Kaluga and led to a significant increase in productivity.

Processing the caviar was another challenge to overcome. The company sent employees to Germany to learn the techniques involved and they later set up a caviar production workshop in a rented warehouse.

In 2006, they produced China's first jar of farmed caviar. "We started with about 500 kilograms that year, then gradually increased to 1.7

tons, 3.2 tons, and in 2023 we hit 221 tons," Xia said.

Their workshop became too small for their requirements and in 2010 the company built a processing center in Quzhou, Zhejiang. Since then, the company has expanded its operations beyond Qiandao Lake to Liaoning, Sichuan and Hubei provinces.

"Our technology is ready to be replicated elsewhere in China," Xia said. "We have also invited environmental and fisheries experts and others to study wastewater treatment. Through chemical methods, we turn wastewater into organic fertilizer, which is supplied to local farmers for use, forming a good agricultural cycle."

Farmers have also been taught how to breed sturgeons and sell them to the company. A research institute to train students in aquaculture and production techniques has also been established, Xia said.

Liquid gold

Olive oil, often called "liquid gold", has been gaining popularity

in China in recent years. However, for a long time domestic consumers favored imported brands.

In the 1970s, Professor Xu Weiyang, an olive oil expert from China Agricultural University, suggested planting olive trees imported from Albania in Wudu district, Longnan, as a trial. After a few years the trees began to thrive, prompting the local government to invest in establishing an olive oil demonstration base.

In 1998, the International Olive Council's World Olive Distribution Map marked China's presence for the first time, specifically noting Wudu district. By 2005, Wudu olive oil had earned certification as a geographical indication product.

With an ideal climate and environment for olive tree cultivation, Longnan is today one of the world's top olive oil-producing regions. It is also China's largest olive oil production area.

During the 2023-2024 pressing season, Wudu district is expected to produce 7,500 tons of olive oil, a year-on-year increase of 20.97 percent, according to a recent Wudu government report.

Founded in 2018, Olive Time Technology, is a leading player in Longnan's olive oil industry.

"We ensure our olives are processed within 24 hours of picking to make our premium extra-virgin olive oil," said Li Chao, the company's vice president and production manager.

The company has approximately 3,300 hectares of land in the Wudu district as its supply base, which in turn has driven nearly 250,000 people to develop olive products, he said.

In 2023, the company purchased 4,600 tons of fresh olives and produced 510 tons of oil with an expected output value of 68 million yuan.

Li said Longnan has few profitable crops, so the olive oil industry is a boon for local farmers. About 0.06 hectares of land can produce around 250 kilograms of olives, providing farmers with approximately 4,000 yuan in income, a much higher return than other crops, he said.

"Compared with cereal crops, olive tree cultivation is much simpler, requiring only watering and pruning," Li said. "Outside the busy harvest season around October, farmers can also work elsewhere during their spare time."

Domestic olive oil is becoming more popular with Chinese consumers, he said. Domestic olive oil also has a price advantage over imported olive oil of similar quality.

"If domestic olive oil can gain a foothold in the Chinese market as sales increase, the enthusiasm of farmers and enterprises will increase, and the quality and production efficiency of olive oil will also improve," Li said.

The company's oil processing uses imported production lines, with an oil yield of about 12 percent. However, it is collaborating with the Lanzhou Institute of Chemical Physics, the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Gansu Agricultural University to develop new equipment and technology to improve the oil yield.

In addition, they are also developing more derivative products, including olive pickles, olive oil beef sauce and olive oil gummies.

There are plans to get Chinese consumers into the habit of drinking olive oil, which has purported health benefits. "We are developing powdered olive oil products that can be mixed with water for drinking, and can also be flavored with honey to better suit consumers' dietary habits," said Li.

Shangri-La wine, Dalian's Wagyu beef a cut above the rest

By LI YINGXUE

Beef belly, tongue, tenderloin, filet and sirloin steak are all on the menu of the Japanese restaurant chain Sushi Yotsuba, which uses about 38 different beef cuts in its dishes every day.

However, the prime cut is Wagyu beef and to many diners' surprise, it isn't imported. Instead, it comes from Dalian, Liaoning province, where the Wagyu cattle are raised on a 900-day grain diet.

In recent years, high-quality ingredients sourced domestically have become popular in upscale restaurants across China. Consumers are also increasingly appreciating locally sourced ingredients thanks to advances in farming techniques,

transportation and storage.

According to Li Yiran, Sushi Yotsuba's vice president, their Wagyu dishes are a big hit. "The meat is tender and flavorful, whether it's sliced, grilled, simmered or stir-fried," Li said. "The most popular items are Wagyu sushi, Wagyu fried rice and Wagyu hot pot."

Customers' perceptions of domestic Wagyu beef have evolved, he said. They no longer have a sole preference for imported varieties and are recognizing the quality of locally sourced meat.

Sushi Yotsuba has been exploring the use of domestic Wagyu since 2016. It started using Wagyu sourced from Dalian in December. Last November, Li and his team visited Dalian's Xuelong Wagyu Beef factory.

"The most memorable part (of the visit) was the well-organized and tidy cattle pens equipped with fans, wind barriers and special feeding troughs," Li said.

The team inspected the on-site butchering of the meat and later tasted the products. "This visit resulted in many new cuts being introduced to our customers," he said.

Sushi Yotsuba selects 100 percent purebred Wagyu. Animals raised for 28-36 months have a more refined taste compared with regular Wagyu cattle raised for 300 days.

The difference between free-range and raised cattle is the ability to finely control the Wagyu's growth. If done correctly, it results in meat with more marbling, Li learned.

"Domestic Wagyu has a significant advantage in fresh meat transportation time. For example, the import time of Australian Wagyu is 30-60 days, while the transportation time of Xuelong Wagyu is 10 hours," Li explains.

Domestic wines are also becoming increasingly popular in Chinese restaurants.

Ban Shan Yao from Under Clouds, a Yunnan restaurant in Beijing, recently introduced a new wine list featuring 24 wines from the Shangri-La region of Yunnan province.

Xie Li, a wine expert and author, said grape cultivation arrived in Shangri-La in the mid-19th century with the spread of Catholicism. In the 21st century, the industry has flourished with the establishment of

multiple wineries and an influx of winemakers from around the world.

Shangri-La vineyards are at altitudes ranging from 1,700 to 3,000 meters. Mild sunlight and a long growing season make it an ideal wine-producing region. Xie believes Shangri-La has the potential to produce exceptional wines.

"The unique environment of this region means that Shangri-La isn't focused on producing large quantities of wine. Compared with flatland farming, grape cultivation here involves higher costs in management and transportation," Xie said.

"Local Tibetans tend the vineyards and the wineries pay them fairly, contributing to better local incomes."

Xie has visited Shangri-La many

times and over the past decade, she's seen the rise of many new wineries. "Shangri-La is very welcoming and has attracted numerous foreign winemakers," she said.

Wine from Ao Yun winery in Shangri-La is the only Chinese grape product included in the distribution network of the French province of Bordeaux. The winery's recognition has helped Shangri-La earn its place on the international wine map.

Xie said Chinese wines, including those from Shangri-La, have seen a remarkable growth in popularity in recent decades. Domestic wine enthusiasts are now more open to trying and appreciating Chinese wines. "Some locally produced wines cater to the tastes of newcomers to the domestic wine scene," she added.

TOP NEWS

After the storm



Workers clean up a residential street where a large tree branch fell, knocking out power and damaging vehicles on Monday in Los Angeles, California, the United States. An atmospheric river storm is bringing heavy rains to California two weeks after a powerful storm led to widespread flooding, mudslides and power outages in parts of the state. MARIO TAMA / GETTY IMAGES / AFP

Brain-computer interface tech set to surge in nation

Solutions being developed to improve lives of people with disabilities

By ZHENG YIRAN

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The brain-computer interface in China is expected to develop rapidly, thanks to policy support, technological advancement and surging demand.

With the ability to regulate brain functioning through stimulation, the interface is a frontier technology that could assist in rehabilitation of patients with brain diseases and injuries, and even expand the human brain's processing capability in the future.

At Ruijin Hospital affiliated with the Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine, surgery using a brain pacemaker with brain-computer interface function and multi-target combined stimulation to treat depression was successfully completed in 2020, the first of its kind in the world. The hospital recently spoke about the patient's successful recovery.

The patient was 31-year-old Wu Xiaotian, who had been suffering from depression for 16 years. Depression often left his brain blank, and he was unable to express

even simple greetings such as a "hello". At its worst, it left him lying motionless in bed all day.

The external world seemed like a vacuum to him. "It had nothing to do with me," he recalled.

Today, Wu is a happy man. Now there is a neural regulatory device, known as a brain pacemaker, buried in his right chest cavity. It is connected to two electrodes, extending from the device in front of the chest to behind the ear, and then from the posterior brain to the anterior side of the brain, passing through the nerve nuclei at the front end of the brain. Electric stimulation of these nerves makes depressive symptoms disappear.

He can crack jokes and talk to strangers without any hesitation. Fond of music, he starts humming when he is at a place that makes him happy.

On Jan 28, the Elon Musk-backed neurotechnology company Neuralink announced that it had carried out its first brain chip implant.

Other companies are developing similar interfaces to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities

by enabling them to control prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs or other assistive devices directly with their thoughts. Some companies are working to use the technology to restore lost sensory or motor functions in individuals who have experienced paralysis, limb loss or the treatment of neurological conditions; and as a means of communication for individuals with conditions that limit their ability to speak or write.

In fact, China has been exploring the technology for many years. Not only has it made breakthroughs in basic research, but it also has implemented practical applications in fields such as healthcare, education and entertainment.

The country's emphasis on brain-computer interface technology is evident. As early as 2016, it announced the launch of the China Brain Project, or Brain Science and Brain-Like Intelligence Technology, where the interface played a key role, displaying enormous growth potential.

"Currently, China's brain-computer interface industrial chain is not perfect, with some key features

such as chips being the weak links. With policy support and technology advancement, the market scale of China's brain-computer interface segment is estimated to grow rapidly, and form a market worth 100 billion yuan (\$13.9 billion)," said Zhang Yue, chairman of AoYo International Media Beijing Co Ltd.

Hong Yong, an associate research fellow at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation's e-commerce research institute, said: "China's brain-computer interface development is a positive trend and has great growth potential. Although we are currently dependent on core technologies from overseas, the situation encourages domestic companies to enhance R&D capabilities, to explore core technologies on our own."

"In the future, propelled by policy, capital and market demand, the brain-computer interface industry is expected to achieve the autonomy of key technologies and make commercial progress in multiple application scenarios such as healthcare, rehabilitation training, education and entertainment, and intelligent control."

To boost the development of the sector, Wang Peng, an associate research fellow at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, suggested that China should enhance independent R&D and innovation, improve relevant laws and regulations, promote the coordinated development of the industry, and increase market acceptance.

Messi's message 'won't easily' repair his image in China

By SHI FUTIAN
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Soccer star Lionel Messi's belated explanation for his no-show at a recent exhibition game in Hong Kong seems to not be enough to redeem his broken image in China, as experts call for more transparent communication regarding such incidents.

In a two-minute video posted on Messi's personal account on Chinese social media platform Weibo on Monday, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner said the reason he did not play was due to injury instead of politics. And Messi pointed out that he had a "very close and special" relationship with China.

"I've heard people say that I didn't want to play for political reasons and many other reasons that are totally untrue. Had that been the case, I wouldn't even have traveled to Japan or visited China as many times as I have," said Messi, who now plays as a striker for Inter Miami, in Spanish.

"As I said at the press conference, I had an inflamed adductor. ... Then on the day before the match in Hong Kong, I tried to train and made an effort for all those who'd come to watch the training. I did all I could."

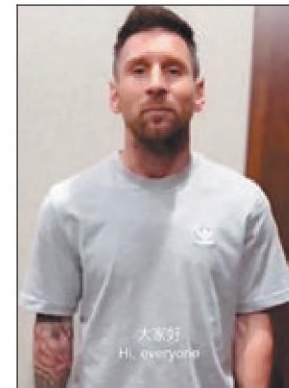
The statement instantly generated a number of trending topics on Chinese social media platforms. For example, the hashtag "Messi's response", which topped the trending news table of Weibo, had been viewed over 710 million times by Tuesday morning. While many expressed their frustration and even anger online, some have accepted the explanation.

"Messi did not apologize, but he has clearly explained what happened and ruled out political reasons. I just represent myself and I accept his explanation. ... Of course, after the controversy, Messi's public image in China has been damaged and it won't easily be fixed. That's the cost," Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of Global Times, commented on Weibo.

It was not the first time that fans have had unpleasant experiences after stars failed to show up at commercial matches or on tours.

In 2019, Cristiano Ronaldo's non-appearance at a friendly match between Juventus and a K-League All-Stars even triggered an investigation by South Korean police. And in January, two friendly matches between Ronaldo's current club — Al-Nassr of the Saudi Pro League — and Chinese Super League clubs in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, were indefinitely postponed due to Ronaldo being injured, which also triggered controversy.

However, the public's disappointment was eased by Ronaldo's instant apology at a media conference and the organizers' promises that all sold tickets could be refunded and the expenses incurred by fans on travel and hotels would also be covered.



I've heard people say that I didn't want to play for political reasons and many other reasons that are totally untrue. Had that been the case, I wouldn't even have traveled to Japan or visited China as many times as I have."

Lionel Messi, (above) in a video posted on his personal account on Chinese social media platform Weibo

Messi's controversy started on Feb 4 when he stayed on the bench throughout Inter Miami's 4-1 win against a local team in Hong Kong. His no-show drew boos and calls for refunds from thousands of fans who had shelled out large sums to see the World Cup-winning captain play in Hong Kong.

Messi's controversy also gives a lesson to organizers who plan to stage superstar-related activities or matches in the future.

Adam Zhang Qing, founder of Beijing-based sports marketing consultancy Key-Solution, told China Daily: "There are three principles for handling this kind of situation, which are 'face', 'fact' and 'fast'. There were much better options to avoid such a crisis. First, he needed to have made a faster response instead of posting the video two weeks later."

"All such controversies need to be faced directly and all responses need to be based on facts. And another key is to avoid being emotional," he said. "Moreover, in the future, for commercial friendly matches, such as the Hong Kong event, the contracts should be as detailed and comprehensive as possible. All these kind of situations should be listed in the contracts and have corresponding solutions."

Sun Xiaochen contributed to this story.

AI: Efforts made to turn challenge into advantage

From page 1

69 percent

of respondents have tried to use AI tools such as ChatGPT in their daily work, while only 7.7 percent have never heard about such tools, according to a survey by Zhaopin.

The report further indicated that China is not fully ready to adjust its job market or labor supply resources with the development of AI, and some skills or knowledge-based jobs have started to take a hit.

To actively adapt to the changing job market, some employees — especially those born after 1995 — are making efforts to use AI in their daily work and turn the technological challenge into an advantage.

According to a recent survey by Zhaopin, 69 percent of employees have tried to use AI tools such as ChatGPT in their daily work, while only 7.7 percent have never heard about such tools.

"We need to see AI technology in a more objective and reasonable way, instead of panicking or worrying. What we average people need to do is embrace it with a positive attitude, and keep learning to strengthen our personal working abilities," said Li, the Zhaopin vice-president.

"Digital technology may grow to become an essential working skill, like using office software, so we

encourage job seekers to put in extra efforts to acquire more knowledge of digital and AI technologies," he said.

"However, AI is not omnipotent, so job seekers and employees can enhance their 'soft skills', such as emotional competence, to make themselves more competitive in the market," he added.

Yang, the illustrator, said that although AI has changed and will keep changing the industry, it cannot replace the human touch and personal improvisations in artwork.

"We can neither overlook nor overestimate AI," she said. "As humans, we have to be more diversified. Maybe AI will have emotions in the future, but as of now, it is just a tool serving people's needs. It is never wrong to keep learning."

Conflict: NATO in 'aid fatigue' for Ukraine

From page 1

Perhaps as a countermeasure, in January 2024, Zelensky signed a presidential decree declaring parts of the Russian southern regions bordering Ukraine, such as Krasnodar, Belgorod, Bryansk, Voronezh, Kursk and Rostov, as Ukraine's "historical territories".

The most dangerous change in the conflict over the past year has been the increasing frequency of Ukraine's attacks on Russian territory. In December, Ukraine launched its largest-scale air raid on the Russian city of Belgorod since the start of the conflict. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that the attack used internationally banned cluster munitions, resulting in 25 deaths, including children, and more than 100 injuries. On Jan 24, a Russian Il-76 military transport plane crashed in the Belgorod region. The Russian Ministry of Defense said that it was shot down by a Ukrainian missile. All 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war on board, who were prepared for a prisoner

Continuing the conflict will not only cause both parties to pay a higher price, but will increase the risk of expanding the scope of the conflict, escalate the means of warfare and raise the chances of collateral risks. It is also unlikely to enable either side to achieve its objectives.

exchange, and nine Russian personnel were killed.

During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, NATO's military aid to Ukraine has been very important. But two years on, NATO members have generally experienced "aid fatigue" for Ukraine, characterized by increased domestic disagree-

ment, insufficient military-industrial capacity, and disappointment with the situation in Ukraine, leading to a sharp decline in aid amounts. From August to October 2023, the assistance pledged by various countries to Ukraine amounted to 2.11 billion euros (\$2.27 billion), nearly a 90 percent decrease compared with the same period in 2022.

Against this backdrop, NATO plans to conduct a military exercise in Europe called Steadfast Defender 2024. This four-month-long exercise will involve 90,000 participants, making it the largest military exercise in Europe since the end of the Cold War. The Steadfast Defender exercises are held every three years, and the 2021 exercise significantly worsened the security situation in the Black Sea region, contributing to the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

NATO has always explicitly excluded the possibility of direct involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, but the military exercise will further deteriorate the security situation in Europe, and the risk

of an accidental clash between NATO and Russia has increased.

From a rational and humanitarian perspective, the Russia-Ukraine conflict can only be resolved politically. Continuing the conflict will not only cause both parties to pay a higher price, but will increase the risk of expanding the scope of the conflict, escalate the means of warfare and raise the chances of collateral risks. It is also unlikely to enable either side to achieve its objectives.

In terms of politically resolving the conflict, China's position is the correct direction, reflecting the true responsibility of a major power. The international community should do everything possible to get the two countries to agree to a cease-fire as soon as possible and resolve disputes through negotiations, rather than using the situation to achieve their own purposes. No country can truly gain sustainable benefits from the disaster of another.

The author is deputy director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

CHINA

HK center to use AI to identify sporting talent

By ATLAS SHAO in Hong Kong
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The Chinese University of Hong Kong established an innovation center on Tuesday that will use artificial intelligence technology to help the city pick those with the potential to be elite athletes in various sports and monitor their recovery from sports injuries.

The Global Sports and Wellness Innovation Centre will apply AI-based automatic retinal image analysis in the sports arena.

The technology, developed by the university in 2015, can provide insights into abilities related to cognition, concentration, physical strength, speed, agility, reaction time, balance and coordination.



The innovation center ... will help Hong Kong's sports sector to identify elite athletes and bring out their potential while promoting the development of sports-related technology."

Benny Zee Chung-ying, director of the Centre for Clinical Research and Biostatistics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

The indicators can be factored into predictions of an athlete's performance in various sports and during competitions, and can also be used to assess minor injuries from concussions during contact sports.

The center also plans to use AI technology to monitor athletes' recovery from sports injuries, with a view of early intervention and the formulation of recovery plans.

The center was established with cooperation from enterprises and academic institutions in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland.

The enterprises are Aqua Bloom International Sports Technology Group, Innovax Holding Ltd, responsible for sourcing capital and resources for the center's projects, and Funeng Intelligent Manufacturing (Beijing) Technology Service Co Ltd, which is responsible for producing a one-stop manufacturing service — including the production of equipment for taking retinal images.

Carlos Law, Funeng's deputy general manager, said mass production of the equipment could be realized this year with sufficient funding.

Benny Zee Chung-ying, director of the Centre for Clinical Research and Biostatistics at the university's Jockey Club School of Public Health and Primary Care, said: "The innovation center, an embodiment of industry-university research collaboration, will help Hong Kong's sports sector to identify elite athletes and bring out their potential while promoting the development of sports-related technology."

Zee said he hopes the center will also help promote the economy and academic development in Hong Kong.

The development of sports will create jobs and business opportunities and also benefit public health, he said.

Zee said the technology is mature and can identify risks of stroke and depression, so widespread application could benefit the whole world.

Sports technology will be the start, he said, with other sectors such as traditional Chinese medicine to be explored in the future.

Harbin Holiday



Visitors pose for photos with ice sculptures inspired by the movie *Roman Holiday* at the Sun Island Ice and Snow Art Gallery in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, on Monday. The newly opened venue covers an area of nearly 5,000 square meters and contains nine themed areas, showcasing over 100 ice sculptures and snow artworks. LIU YANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Top court puts nursing homes under spotlight

Judicial efforts highlight barrier-free environment to protect seniors' rights

By CAO YIN
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Nursing homes will be held liable if injuries result from their failure to provide a barrier-free environment for old people, China's top court said.

The Supreme People's Court released details of six influential cases involving elderly care institutions on Tuesday, highlighting judicial efforts to protect the legitimate rights of seniors and promote the healthy development of the industry.

In one recent case, the family of an 82-year-old woman surnamed Ma sued a nursing care center in Chengdu, Sichuan province, in a local court, demanding compensation after she fell on her way to a bathroom at the center, resulting in fractures.

During the trial, the Chengdu court found the facilities at the center were not senior-friendly, as a manhole cover along the pathway to the restroom was significantly higher than the ground, which caused Ma to fall and also posed a safety hazard to others.

The court ruled in favor of Ma's

family, citing the Civil Code, the fundamental law regulating civil activities, which noted that public service operators, such as hotels, airports, gyms and entertainment venues, should shoulder legal responsibilities if they fail to fulfill the duty of ensuring safety.

The facilitation of a barrier-free environment also needs to be combined with senior-friendly renovations in line with the law on construction of a barrier-free environment, following the principles of safety, convenience, ease of use and wide-ranging benefits, the court added.

While introducing the case to the public, the top court said: "It is essential for nursing homes to renovate and improve facilities to make them more accessible to seniors in consideration of their physical conditions. Safety hazards that may pose risks or obstacles to the elderly should be eliminated."

With a population of 1.41 billion, China is facing an increasingly serious aging issue. At the end of 2022, the country had more than 280 million people aged above 60, roughly 20 percent of the population. That was up from around 267 million at the end of 2021.

As the population ages, more nursing homes have been opened, with various services offered. However, due to inconsistent service standards and unclear rules, the management and development of such institutions is uneven, the top court said.

In another case, an elderly person surnamed Xiang paid over 30,000 yuan (\$4,200) to a nursing home, but the institution, against Xiang's will, frequently changed the place of residence, moving Xiang from Chongqing to Yunnan province, and then to Sichuan.

As a result, Xiang returned to Chongqing, refusing to accept the services provided by the institution, and sued it in a grassroots court. After a trial, Xiang was given a refund of about 10,000 yuan.

Clarifying that residential care is a core issue for nursing homes, the top court used the case to call on them to ensure a suitable living environment and improve the quality of other services.

In addition to the courts, government agencies have also taken steps to optimize services for the elderly and protect their interests. For example, civil affairs departments have established more barrier-free facilities in more city-level residential communities and set up pension service majors at vocational schools.

China, Thailand set up engineering college

By YANG CHENG in Tianjin
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An engineering college joint venture between Chinese and Thai universities is set to usher in a novel model for vocational and technological education in Thailand and advance China's global standing.

Inaugurated at a ceremony in Nakhon Sawan, Thailand, on Jan 27, it represents a significant step forward in internationalizing Chinese vocational education.

The Engineering College, established by Tianjin Bohai Vocational Technical College and Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University, will offer four-year diploma courses with bilingual instruction, providing both Chinese and Thai students with unique study and vocational practice opportunities in both countries.

The program's initial phase, offering a major in new energy vehicles, will open its doors to students from May onward.

"The two parties will collaborate on curriculum design, develop international teaching resources, and engineering practice projects, further enhancing China-Thai friendship," said Chairat Pranee, president of Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University.

Wei Bingju, secretary of the Party committee at Tianjin Bohai Vocational Technical College, said: "We aim to cultivate a cadre of high-caliber international technical elites, develop several high-level bilingual courses and significantly enrich education resources."

This initiative forms part of a broader effort by the Ministry of Education and the Tianjin government to explore modern vocational and technological education reforms, and follows the launch of the globally renowned Luban

Workshops in Thailand in 2016. There are now 27 Luban training facilities, spread across 25 countries.

The Engineering College will offer a different model.

Named after Lu Ban, an ancient Chinese woodcraft master, the workshops have gained popularity in recent years, becoming a focal point of Chinese efforts to promote international cooperation in vocational education.

Most Luban Workshops previously offered periodic training, with only a few providing diplomas. Most Chinese teachers left the workshops after several years of training, with foreign teachers then continuing the courses. Additionally, the workshops did not offer Chinese language training.

Instead of periodic training programs, the Engineering College will provide full four-year diploma courses with joint enrollment and training, facilitating a deeper exchange of teaching staff, course integration and communication channels.

The model has garnered support from key figures in Thailand's vocational education sector.

The principal of Ayutthaya Technical College, where the first Luban Workshop in the world was established, expressed her appreciation for the new model at the inauguration ceremony, along with her predecessor.

"I have witnessed the day-to-day vocational education in China and deeply appreciate the Tianjin college's unremitting efforts," principal Mayuree Sriraboot said.

Former principal Jarun Youbrum said: "I have enjoyed a delightful collaboration with the Tianjin Bohai Vocational Technical College throughout my career and will continue to support its new initiatives in Thailand for the rest of my life."

Cold wave in capital



A man runs in the snow in Beijing on Tuesday evening as the city's urban area welcomed its first snowfall of the Year of the Dragon. The new cold wave has also swept across central and eastern parts of the country. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



Branch hospital offers advanced surgeries

By WANG XIAOYU
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Less than a month after Zhejiang People's Hospital in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, opened a branch in the neighboring city of Shaoxing in early January, a number of complicated surgeries could be performed locally.

"In the past, even though I saw patients in there, I wouldn't dare perform the risky operation of removing tumors in the head and neck that invade the base of the skull due to the lack of a sound medical team in Shaoxing handling pre- and postoperative care," said Ge Minghua, president of the hospital and a senior surgeon specializing in the treatment of tumors in the thyroid, head and neck.

Gu added that the branch hospital also introduced robot-assisted surgeries to Shaoxing and several robotic operations have been successfully carried out.

The establishment of the hospital branch promises deeper and more direct partnerships between major hospitals and local governments, providing consistent and sustainable medical services of high quality to wider populations, according to Ge, who is also a deputy to the National People's Congress, China's top legislature.

"The branch hospital differs from the traditional model of sending medical experts from major hospi-

tals to grassroots clinics regularly to receive patients," he said.

"The main campus in Hangzhou and the branch in Shaoxing are closely knitted and all clinical and management departments, including arrangement of shifts of hospital staff, are coordinated.

"Put simply, all medical workers and senior experts now work at both sites, enabling patients in Shaoxing to enjoy our services without leaving the city."

During this year's two sessions — the largest annual political event in China — which opens on March 4, Ge said that he plans to translate the project's successful experiences into a proposal to be submitted to the NPC.

The proposal would call for achieving common prosperity in healthcare through building closer partnerships between large, advanced hospitals and local governments to widen access to high-quality medical services.

China has been promoting balanced regional distribution of medical services for years.

According to the National Health Commission, by November China had set up 13 national medical centers and several regional medical centers targeting pediatrics.

In the meantime, 125 regional medical centers have been initiated and over 80 cities and more than 820 counties have begun programs that band together major

and small hospitals to build a more robust medical system.

However, Ge said that such cooperation should extend beyond the dispatching of senior doctors to less developed areas and requires deeper integration and the full commitment of leading hospitals.

Zhejiang province, he said, is an ideal testing ground for the new model because its robust transportation system allows doctors and nurses to commute regularly between two cities.

"In the long run, we expect the hospital branch to expand its coverage to county clinics and community healthcare centers, and eventually form a local medical network," he said.

Ge, who became an NPC deputy in 2013, has submitted around 60 proposals, with the majority centering on healthcare reforms.

Novel approaches to improving medical capacities at the grassroots level have been a particular area of focus.

"When formulating proposals, I first examine whether an issue truly exists and whether there are practical solutions to it," he said.

"Through full investigation and interviews, I also test the feasibility of my suggestions."

During last year's two sessions, Ge submitted a proposal calling for stronger investment in teenagers' mental health.

Surviving fishermen return from Kinmen

Two fishermen from the Chinese mainland who survived a recent fishing boat incident near Kinmen, an island administered by Taiwan and located near the mainland, boarded a ferry at 4:30 pm on Tuesday to return to the mainland from Kinmen, Taiwan's China Times reported.

A fishing boat from the mainland was forcefully driven into waters near Kinmen by Taiwan authorities on Feb 14, causing all four people on board to fall into the sea, resulting in two fatalities.

Representatives of the Red Cross Society of China branch in the port city of Quanzhou in Fujian province accompanied family members of the fishermen to Kinmen on Tuesday morning to deal with the aftermath of the incident.

Upon arrival in Kinmen, Li Zhaohui, a senior consultant to the Red Cross Society of China branch in Jinjiang, Quanzhou, told media the violent pursuit of the fishing boat by the island authorities had caused strong indignation on the mainland and seriously harmed the feelings of compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, China News Service reported.

"Our visit to Kinmen is to understand the truth, assist with post-incident matters and bring

back the two survivors," he said. "We demand that the relevant Taiwan authorities take the families' legitimate concerns seriously, cooperate in handling post-incident matters and avoid further harm to the families."

The group will stay in Kinmen for two days. The families of the deceased will be in Kinmen to learn more about the situation and participate in related funeral ceremonies, according to reports from Taiwan media.

The China Coast Guard announced on Sunday that the authorities in Fujian will strengthen maritime law enforcement capabilities and conduct regular patrols in the waters near Fujian's Xiamen and Kinmen to maintain order and safeguard fishermen's lives and property.

The pro-reunification Labor Party in Taiwan issued a statement on Tuesday, urging all sectors of society in Taiwan to take the incident seriously and create a rational atmosphere for cross-strait exchanges and dialogue.

The party said the incident should not be used to escalate cross-strait tension, or allow external forces to manipulate the situation toward conflict.

POLICY REVIEW

Seniors looking after one another

Guideline casts light on community care culture in rural nursing homes

By LI LEI
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On a recent afternoon, dozens of elderly farmers were playing chess in a courtyard awash with sunshine, a common scene at the Madongchuan Township Zhaotai Village Mutual Support Nursing Home.

Situated behind them was their dormitory—rows of cave dwellings, a unique form of residence in Yan'an, a hilly part of Northwest China's Shaanxi province.

There are no caregivers in sight. Instead, the residents look after one another at the self-service nursing facility, which was repurposed from a deserted primary school in Madongchuan township.

The younger ones grow cabbages and other vegetables in a small patch of land nearby. They cook outdoors using a shared kitchen, and the food is delivered to those with mobility issues. After meals, many play chess or chat at their leisure.

Local authorities also hired a retired village doctor to oversee the facility so that the residents no longer have to travel to a nearby county for less severe health problems such as cold and fever.

"They were enjoying themselves in the moment, and leading rather independent lives," Zhao Liwen, secretary-general of Taikang Yicai Foundation, said of her first impression about the residents during a visit in 2019.

The Beijing-based charity donated 1 million yuan (\$139,000) to the nursing home to help expand its space a year earlier.

When she arrived, the seniors, all empty-nesters in their 80s and 90s who are either childless or have children working in big cities, huddled together to wrap dumplings in anticipation of Chinese New Year.

The scene was a sharp contrast from life in the area more than a decade ago. Village elders used to live lonely lives, scattered among the rugged terrain and unable to access hospitals and other public services.

Then in 2013, a flood washed their crumbling homes away, forcing them to move into the nursing facility.

"I have been working in the charity sector for some years, but the elderly people in Yan'an had left me with very deep impressions," Zhao said.

The nursing home in Yan'an is one of the best examples of China's ramped-up efforts to tap the strength of "relationship-based communities" in rural areas to ensure fast-graying residents are cared for.

Compared with a more transactional or rule-based society in urban areas, rural communities in China are known to operate through personal connections and mutual trust.

The self-sufficient, interdependent culture embodied by the nursing home is being bolstered by authorities to cope with aging in the countryside, a decades-long issue that has been exacerbated by an exodus of younger residents.

Resolving shortage

In a recent document issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and 11 other central government organs, authorities are looking to older adults to care for even older ones in rural areas to address a nationwide shortage of caregivers.

While briefing reporters about the guideline late last month, Li Yongxin, deputy director of the ministry's elder care service department, said the department is working to entice younger retirees and others with the "strength and willingness" to work as caregivers, start related businesses and offer voluntary services in the countryside.

"Working in the sector requires both professional precision and compassionate warmth," Li said, adding that it is a respectable profession that helps ease social and family burdens.

In rural areas, older people usually rely on family members for care because commercial services are either scarce or unaffordable.

However, the age-old arrangement is facing challenges as younger people have left rural hometowns for better paid jobs in coastal areas.



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

Despite recent government efforts to vitalize rural areas and create jobs in the countryside, more than 176 million rural workers left home to find jobs elsewhere last year, a year-on-year increase of 2.7 percent.

The mass migration creates large numbers of so-called left-behind seniors and empty-nesters in need of socialized care services.

Zhao, the secretary-general of Taikang Yicai, said rural areas may lag in terms of economic prosperity, but their closely-knit communities may lend them some strength when it comes to elder care.

The success of the nursing home in Madongchuan, she said, was partly because the project has mobilized local human resources that would otherwise have been overlooked.

Rather than relying on caregivers from outside the village, the approach is more economically sustainable.

Zhao said her foundation is working with a local university and authorities in Yan'an to find out if the project can be replicated in other hollowed-out villages.

"We're eager to see if the model can function in the formerly impoverished places without much government funding," she said.

Cafeteria program

Another area harnessing the familial atmosphere of rural communities to care for seniors can be found in Yangxi village in the southern part of Gansu province, which was home to

some of the country's most intractable poverty.

Jing Lizhong, a social worker, witnessed firsthand how a nonprofit cafeteria had greatly improved the health of local empty-nesters and offered seniors an area where they can gather for fun or receive services such as haircuts or blood pressure checks.

Jing, who works with a charity in Gansu, was first brought to Yangxi by a project to promote drip irrigation technology and expand the profit margin of local apple farmers.

During his stay, the 35-year-old was stunned by how older people there make do with instant noodles and other convenient foods.

"There's a type of dried food called 'lazy-bones noodles.' When it comes to meal time, seniors would boil the noodles, serve them in sour soup and make do with it," he said.

Over time, such food began taking a toll on the elderly people's health.

"Some say they do not even have the strength to walk around," Jing said.

In 2022, a cafeteria was built in the village as part of a charity project called Amity Papa and Mama's Canteen. The project was initiated by the Amity Foundation and Alibaba Philanthropy in 2014 and now has more than 200 cafeterias in 28 provincial-level jurisdictions.

For just 2 yuan, older villagers can have a proper lunch in Yangxi, enjoying foods such as steamed buns, braised chicken legs and deep-fried pancakes, and the menu changes daily. The program covers the bulk of the meal costs.

The program was launched with an investment deemed modest by even local standards.

The construction of the more than 100-square-meter facility cost just 100,000 yuan because many younger farmers came back from urban factories and contributed labor.

Elderly farmers known for their culinary skills were recruited to cook there, and they were happy to accept the positions because even though the pay was low, they wouldn't have to venture out of the village to find jobs.

Voluntary services offered by the diners helped mitigate the need to hire sanitary workers and administration staff.

"The village's older people's committee created a duty roster to do the cleaning after lunch," Jing said.

Over the past two years, the cafeteria has morphed into a complex where older people can get haircuts free-of-charge, which are given by their peers. This has saved them the trouble of visiting a nearby county for the service, because the village had no barbershop.

They can also get their blood pressure tested with equipment stored at the cafeteria.

When someone passes away, the facility becomes a makeshift memorial hall, where villagers can pay their respects to their deceased neighbors.

"When some older people miss a meal or two, others call their children or make house calls to make sure no accidents have happened," Jing said.

Policy Digest

Rules rolled out on export of second-hand vehicles

The Ministry of Commerce, together with four other central government bodies, said in a notice that they have decided to allow all regions in the country to engage in the second-hand automobile export industry. Specific requirements and procedures to standardize the export of second-hand vehicles were also released.

China picked 10 provinces and cities in 2019 as the first in the country to conduct such business. The country added more provinces and cities to the list in the following years.

The second-hand automobile export industry has helped stabilize and improve China's foreign trade, the notice said.

The notice required local authorities to set up their own special work mechanisms to ensure the healthy and sustainable development of the second-hand automobile export industry, asking them to focus on ensuring the quality of the automobiles exported and orderly operations, and to prevent excessive competition.

Companies should obtain third-party reports showing that their exports of second-hand automobiles meet China's quality requirements, the notice said, adding that if import countries have their own standards for second-hand automobile imports, the companies should also make sure that their products meet these standards.

Nation seeks to expand its waste recycling system

The country aims to set up a waste recycling system covering all sectors and a resource recycling industry with an annual output of 5 trillion yuan (\$695 billion) by 2025.

According to a guideline issued by the General Office of the State Council, the country's annual utilization of bulky solid waste, such as tailings, fly ash, coal gangue, slag, byproduct gypsum, construction waste and crop straw, should reach 4 billion metric tons by that year.

In addition, its annual utilization of scrapped steel, iron, copper, aluminum, lead, zinc, paper, plastic, rubber and glass should reach 450 million metric tons by then, the guideline said.

By 2030, China should have a waste recycling system that is comprehensive, highly efficient and orderly, where all kinds of waste are fully exploited, according to the guideline.

7 ski and tourist resorts get national designation

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the General Administration of Sport designated a third batch of national ski and tourist resorts earlier this month.

The seven resorts are located in the provinces of Shanxi, Jilin, Heilongjiang and Gansu and the Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang Uygur autonomous regions.

In an attempt to promote the ice-and-snow economy, the ministry and the administration issued a notice in September, encouraging provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities across the country to recommend local ski resorts as candidates for national ski and tourist resorts.

To date, the two departments have granted national designation to 26 ski and tourist resorts.

WANG QINGYUN

Authorities removing obstacles for would-be caregivers

By LI LEI

Authorities have moved to remove many obstacles for workers who want to become caregivers to address a shortage in the number of people looking after the elderly.

Among the obstacles targets are age limits, education requirements and restrictions related to hukou, or household registration status, officials said last month, citing the "strong, practical nature" of caregiving.

The change was spelled out in a recent guideline issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and 11 other central government organs. The new rules have technically opened up the sector to lesser-trained out-of-towners who have surpassed legal retirement age.

In China, male workers generally retire at age 60, and female workers at age 55. Both

can retire even earlier if they work manual labor jobs.

While briefing reporters about the guideline late last month, Li Yongxin, deputy director of the ministry's elder care service department, vowed more vocational training would be offered to equip potential caregivers with necessary skills.

Officials are also working on an eight-tier professional title system to grade capable workers, similar to one that exists for white-collar workers, he said.

"The accreditation will serve as an important reference to determine their pay," Li said.

Despite caregiving often involving tasks such as changing urine-tainted sheets and helping those with mobility issues bathe, such workers tend to be underpaid and have to work overtime.

The lack of a certification system for pro-

fessional skills meant there was no basis for promotions or pay raises, creating problems for employers willing to pay more to hire more skilled workers.

As a result, most of the posts are taken by middle-aged women from rural areas who work under short-term, informal conditions in cities to help out with family expenses.

"Many are unlikely to work in cities in the long run because social security protection for out-of-towners is scarce," said Fang Jiakou, who owns a nursing home in Tianjin.

In 1995, Fang bought a disused hospital in the city and turned it into a nursing home. The 68-year-old was among the first to promote eight-hour workdays in the sector, which is notorious for grueling working hours because many elderly people require around-the-clock care.

Fang said for-profit nursing homes usually

maximize their profit margins by exploiting caregivers and forcing them to work long hours.

"I embraced the eight-hour workday when I entered the sector, not only for those office workers but also for those changing sheets for disabled elderly people. That has won me a lot of support from my employees."

China's 30 million caregivers, according to the Ministry of Commerce, is 20 million shy of actual market demand.

Earlier this month, the National Bureau of Statistics disclosed fresh population data, which showed that nearly 300 million people, or 21 percent of the population, were age 60 or older by the end of last year. That is almost 90 million more than a decade ago.

A 2015 nationwide survey found that China had more than 40 million disabled or

semi-disabled people who needed intensive care. Experts estimate that number could surpass 77 million by 2030.

The demand for care is still higher for some of China's wealthiest cities, such as Shanghai, where authorities said recently that 36 percent of its permanent residents were age 60 or older by the end of 2022.

Meanwhile, the country's working age population, defined as those between age 16 and 59, was 864 million last year, down from 915 million in 2014, it said.

About 20 million Chinese retire every year. In particular, those born in the 1960s have begun to depart the workforce in large numbers in recent years, according to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security.

Under the current legal framework, the retirees have problems opening social security accounts or signing formal employment contracts with their employers due to age restrictions, leaving them vulnerable to labor abuse.

CHINA

French scientist receives friendship award

Known for biodiversity work, biologist lauds China's collaboration efforts

By LI MENGHAN
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Yvon le Maho, a French biologist and zoologist who was recently honored with the 2023 Chinese Government Friendship Award, has praised China for its achievements in ecological conservation, scientific research and international cooperation.

"I think China is making a huge effort to boost international collaboration, and considering the increase in the production of scientific papers by Chinese scientists, China has made a big success," he said. "The country's ecological and environmental conservation has developed nicely, which Chinese scientists should be very proud of."

The remarks were made following a ceremony hosted by the International Society of Zoological Sciences on Feb 5 to celebrate his receipt of the prestigious award.

The Chinese Government Friendship Award is the highest honor bestowed upon foreigners for their exceptional contributions to reform and development in China. The 2023

award was presented to 50 experts from 26 countries on Feb 4.

Le Maho, 77, said that he felt surprised and happy upon receiving the award, emphasizing that his area of expertise, the preservation of biodiversity, stands as a major international concern and is of global significance.

"Ever since I worked with China 15 years ago, China has had a good scientific level," he said.

He added that the international community has acknowledged China's endeavors in biodiversity conservation. He noted progress made with the Hainan gibbon, a species under first-level State protection in China and the world's rarest primate, whose population has grown from around 13 to 37 over the past two decades, and the crested ibis, whose national population has climbed from just seven in the 1980s to more than 9,000 last year, making up 90 percent of the global total.

Last year, le Maho attended an international conference on China's wandering elephants in Tengchong, Yunnan.

He said that China has established



French biologist and zoologist Yvon le Maho (right) at an event in Beijing. LI MENGHAN / CHINA DAILY

a commendable model for preserving biodiversity without disrupting the daily movements of animals. The elephants are not confined to cages, but rather interact with villagers in an organized manner within a well-protected area.

Zhang Zhibin, the executive director of ISZS who has worked with le Maho for many years, said that the Frenchman has greatly contributed to promoting scientific communication and friendship between the two countries.

Zhang said that as honorary pres-

ident of the France-China association for high-level talent exchange, le Maho makes multiple visits to China every year, delivering speeches to college students and technical workers, attending biological and zoological conferences and encouraging French experts and scholars to come to China.

Reflecting on his numerous visits to Chinese universities, le Maho said that he was impressed by the students' enthusiasm to exchange ideas with foreign scientists, which evoked memories of his own experi-

ences when he was young.

Since China and France issued the Beijing Call for Biodiversity Conservation and Climate Change in 2019, le Maho and Zhang have worked to set up a biodiversity research center that will be jointly run by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the French National Center for Scientific Research.

Set to launch in Beijing in June, the center aims to bring together more than 20 scientists from China and 20 from France to collaborate on scientific research and conduct training sessions for students in the fields of biodiversity, ecological health and ecosystem functions.

"The center will provide a stable platform, allowing for more in-depth studies and closer cross-border collaboration," Zhang said.

As an academican of both the Academy of Europe (Academia Europaea) and the French Academy of Sciences, le Maho is a world-class scientist who specializes in zoological ecology and is known for his groundbreaking work with penguins, according to Zhang.

Le Maho found ways to study the Antarctic birds while minimizing human interference. He pioneered the use of radio-frequency identification tags to keep track of

them, and he also invented a robot disguised as a baby penguin that was used as an antenna to read the tags and collect data.

The French scientist also discovered an antimicrobial molecule in penguins that helps them preserve food stored in their stomachs. This molecule was subsequently used in the development of an antibiotic drug.

Le Maho said that he has met many Chinese scientists who told him that the robotic penguin model he created has greatly inspired them.

He said that cooperation between scientists from China and France is important because they can enhance their expertise through idea exchanges and collaborative brainstorming.

"I'm sure that there will be further development on biodiversity and China-France friendship, and we are doing all we can for that," he added.

Yan Zhongqian contributed to this story.



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A worker makes a lantern for a lantern fair in Zigong, Sichuan province, on Jan 18.
SHEN BOHAN / XINHUA



Zigong lanterns light up festivities around world

CHENGDU — Li Yuanming, an artisan with 30 years of experience crafting lanterns, generally keeps busy during Spring Festival, or Chinese New Year, as well as during international holidays.

The custom of attending lantern fairs during Spring Festival is a time-honored tradition in Chinese culture, with a history spanning over 1,800 years.

Artisans create colored lantern sets at the events that are tailored to meet local tastes. Li, 58, is a native of Zigong in Sichuan province, a city renowned for its lantern-making culture. Li has traveled extensively to create colored lanterns, not only across China but also to the United States, Britain and France.

A lantern fair celebrating its 30th anniversary opened in Zigong a few days before this year's Spring Festival, which began on Feb 10 and will end on Friday. Li was involved in the creation of several lantern sets for this fair.

The fair features an array of lantern designs, including traditional elements such as flowers, birds, dragons, phoenixes, legendary figures and landscapes, as well as contemporary images of cartoon characters and video games that have gained immense popularity among youngsters.

In June, the organizing committee of the lantern fair initiated a global call for designs, attracting submissions from children worldwide. Over 3,000 paintings submitted by young artists from 14 countries and regions were received.

Select pieces were crafted into lantern sets by artisans and are being showcased during the ongoing event.

"The fair is stunning, with a strong New Year atmosphere and abundant elements of the Year of the Dragon. I took a lot of nice, festive photos," said Liu Jiamin, a tourist from Chengdu, capital of Sichuan.

During this year's Spring Festival holiday, Zigong lanterns illuminat-

ed 80 cities across China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an in Shaanxi province and Chengdu in Sichuan.

According to data from the Zigong municipal bureau of commerce, there are around 50,000 workers engaged in the production of colored lanterns in Zigong all year round. The city boasts 1,091 lantern enterprises, with an annual output value of more than 6 billion yuan (\$844.64 million), accounting for 85 percent of the domestic market and 92 percent of the international market.

Currently, a significant proportion of colored lanterns utilized during Christmas, art festivals and light shows worldwide are crafted by skilled artisans from Zigong like Li. Since 1990, when Zigong lanterns debuted internationally in Singapore, Zigong artisans have left their footprints across more than 90 countries and regions.

"Although lantern-making is hard work, I am very proud and excited to see Zigong lanterns light up the

night sky in a foreign land," said Li, who is in charge of building circuits inside the lanterns.

Zigong lanterns enjoy widespread popularity across the globe, primarily due to the integration of traditional crafts and modern technology.

According to Li Zhongwen, vice-president of Lantern Group, the company has held lantern fairs in several countries, including the United Kingdom, France and Ireland, using cutting-edge technologies such as holographic projection and laser water-screen film.

Tang Yusha, deputy director of the Zigong municipal bureau of commerce, said: "Last year, Zigong lanterns lit up 71 cities in 19 countries and regions, attracting more than 20 million visitors. It allowed people around the world to perceive, understand and appreciate Chinese culture in the beauty of light and shadow."

XINHUA

Robots doing farmwork in outskirts of Shanghai

SHANGHAI — Rural farming has long been closely associated with cattle, plows and toil. Today, there are also agricultural robots and all sorts of other intelligent equipment, marking a significant shift in agricultural practices.

At the Diantian Farm in rural Shanghai, this transformation is noticeable. Here, robots operated by engineers have replaced conventional farming cattle.

Among the engineers is Li Wei, who was spotted guiding his agricultural robot with precision, clutching a controller. He is just one of over 70 engineers working at the Diantian rural cooperative, where rice is the main crop.

Over the past seven years, they have been engaged in research and development, resulting in the creation of over 60 types of agricultural robots capable of performing tasks ranging from planting to harvesting.

The robots use crawler feet that can adeptly navigate various types of terrain, while their artificial intelligence operating system serves as the brain to plan their movements.

Farmers simply need to log on to the system through the WeChat mini program on their mobile phones and switch on the robots. "I grew up in the countryside, and I know farmwork can be extremely exhausting," said Wang Jinyue, head of the Diantian agricultural cooperative.

In contrast to the past, a long line of agricultural robots are dotting the field to assist with farmwork today.

They operate efficiently, accurately and tirelessly, said Wang, noting that technologies such as 5G, image recognition and big data enable the robots to swiftly calculate the distance to the crops and achieve rapid harvesting within seconds.

The weeding robots can not only accurately distinguish between grass and crops, but also guide the specialized blades to remove weeds precisely, he said, adding that each



I grew up in the countryside, and I know farmwork can be extremely exhausting."

Wang Jinyue, head of the Diantian agricultural cooperative in Shanghai

weeding robot can operate for eight hours on a one-hour charge.

The agricultural robots at Diantian Farm are equipped with China's BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, also known as BDS. BDS is used in more than 100,000 sets of agricultural machinery automated driving systems in China.

The modernization of agriculture is underway throughout the country. In Hanzhong, Shaanxi province, intelligent equipment has made vegetable cultivation more cost-effective and efficient.

Here, an automated vegetable farm has achieved unmanned production in the entire process of cultivating green leafy vegetables. A vegetable planting area spanning about 13 hectares requires only five farmers.

China unveiled its "No 1 central document" for 2024 earlier this month, outlining the priorities for comprehensively promoting rural vitalization this year.

The document called for consolidating the support of agricultural science and technology and intensifying the research on core technologies of germplasm resources.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the contribution rate of agricultural scientific and technological progress exceeded 62 percent in 2022, with the overall mechanization rate of crop cultivation and harvest reaching 73 percent.

XINHUA

Shanxi site provides more clues about ancient humans

Research on the origin, evolution and diffusion of humans has long been a popular topic in the field of paleoanthropology.

Led by Chinese scientists, an international research team's recent study of a site in North China's Shanxi province has unveiled fresh insights into the characteristics of Homo sapiens dating back 45,000 years.

Located on the southwest margin of Nihewan Basin, the Shiyu site in Shanxi's Shouzhou city was discovered in 1963.

Since 2012, archaeologists from the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Peking

University and various universities and research institutions in China, Australia, France, Britain, Japan, Spain and Germany have carried out comprehensive, multi-disciplinary and cross-platform international collaborative research at the site.

The deposits found at the site indicate that the Shiyu Homo sapiens lived on flat terraces beside rivers, with grassland as their main vegetation.

The archaeologists conducted carbon-14 dating on three animal bone fragments with scratches to obtain direct evidence and establish an accurate timeline of human activity at the site.

They analyzed the data using the Bayesian model — which combines prior knowledge about a population with evidence from information contained in a sample to make an inference — and extended the site's age from about 35,000 years ago to 45,000 years ago.

The study indicates that Shiyu Homo sapiens were skilled in hunting and resource utilization, said Yang Shixia, from the IVPP, who is the first author of the study.

They made and used composite tools to hunt equids — animals related to horses such as donkeys and tapirs — ate meat and bone marrow and used animal skins, Yang added.

Archaeologists also found that the stone tools, ornaments and bone implements unearthed at the site exhibit both Eastern and Western characteristics, providing evidence of the complex human history in East Asia at the time.

The study has updated the traditional understanding of the diffusion and cultural development of Homo sapiens in the region, Yang said.

This study is of great significance for advancing the understanding of the evolution and spread of humanity from a global perspective, Yang added.

XINHUA



An engineer maneuvers a farm robot in a field at the Diantian Farm in Shanghai on Jan 25. ZHAO YIHE / XINHUA

WORLDUS

Experts: China still dominates manufacturing

The notion that global industry is looking to relocate from China is often rooted in rhetoric

By **LIAZHU** in San Francisco
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Despite narratives of decline, China's manufacturing dominance remains unshaken, evolving and adapting to the shifting global landscape, said experts who believe that perceptions of diminishing power often stem from anecdotes rather than data.

The rhetoric that businesses are increasingly looking to relocate manufacturing closer to their home markets to "de-risk" from China overlooks the fact that China is not only adapting to this new trend but also embracing it with a constructive approach, said Kerim Antoine Kfuri, a supply chain expert.

The approach China is making to maintain its role is "near-shoring," Kfuri told China Daily, where China extends its manufacturing expertise to countries closer to its target markets.

"By working diligently to be a part of global near-shoring efforts, China continues to solidify its position as the dominant player in manufacturing and global supply chain," said Kfuri, founder of the Atlas Network LLC, an American company that provides services for mass production, consulting and logistics.

Mexico serves as a prime example for China's active participation in the near-shoring trend. With its proximity to the US, it has attracted not only US companies but also Chinese ones.

A 2023 analysis by Holland & Knight revealed that 80 percent of the space leased by foreign companies in Mexican industrial parks is occupied by Chinese firms, compared with 15 percent rented by US-based companies.

Furthermore, the perception of China as solely a "low-cost, low-quality" manufacturer is outdated, he said.

"This couldn't be further from the truth as some of the most luxurious and prolific global brands have been producing their goods for decades in China," said Kfuri.

Additionally, while geographical distance may seem like a hurdle, China's production speed and scale often compensate, leading to faster product delivery despite the distance, Kfuri pointed out.

China's production speed and manufacturing scale is five to 10 times (even greater in many scenarios) faster than anywhere else in the world, he explained, so shorter production windows yield a faster "product-in-hand" solution despite the

geographic distance.

William Bratton, head of Asia-Pacific cash equity research at BNP Paribas, a leading bank in Europe, emphasized the "all-too-frequent" disconnect between rhetoric and reality when discussing China's manufacturing capabilities, while maintaining that analysis should be driven by numbers and data rather than anecdotes or perceptions.

What is "particularly remarkable" about China's evolving trade structure, said Bratton in a recent blog post, is its capabilities of expanding exports in both low- and high-technology industries simultaneously, whether it's leather products or optical instruments.

In 2021, China generated nearly half the region's manufactured exports, compared with less than a third 15 years ago, he added. The country's rising share of global manufacturing exports also demonstrates that "Chinese manufacturers are, in fact, continuing to go from strength to strength," he said.

A new study by the European think tank the Centre for Economic Policy Research confirms China's dominance in global manufacturing, with its production exceeding that of the nine next largest manufacturers combined.

Analyzing the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's recently released 2023 update of the TiVA database, the study found that in 2020, China made up a staggering 35 percent of global gross manufacturing production, followed by the US, Japan, Germany — China's share is three times the US share, six times Japan's, and nine times Germany's.

By 2020, China's share of global manufacturing exports had risen to 20 percent, compared with just 3 percent in 1995, according to the study.

"I don't think it is as widely known as it should be. Now China is the world's sole manufacturing superpower," said Richard Baldwin, the study's author and professor of International Economics at IMD Business School in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Baldwin urged caution against calls for decoupling from China, highlighting the complex and interconnected nature of global supply chains, where all major manufacturers in the world rely on China for at least 2 percent of their industrial inputs.

"Politicians who indulge in loose talk about decoupling from China need a clear-eyed look at the facts," he said. "Decoupling would be difficult, to say the least."



Staff members of the San Diego Zoo Safari Park show their dragon-themed decorations at the park's special event celebrating the Chinese New Year on Saturday. RENA LI / CHINA DAILY

San Diego Zoo embodies spirit of cooperation

By **RENA LI** in Los Angeles
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Red envelopes, red lanterns, wishing trees, golden dragons and giant pandas — the cherished symbols of Chinese culture — provided joy and excitement at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park during the Chinese New Year celebrations over the weekend.

As visitors reveled in the festivities, they also immersed themselves in the vibrant traditions of the Spring Festival.

Students, parents and teachers from the Third Street Elementary School in Los Angeles, or TSESLA, wrote their good wishes in front of the wishing tree. A dragon symbolizing power, good fortune and strength was crafted through paper-cutting.

"It's such an exciting opportunity for our children to experience Chinese New Year culture, as for many of them, it's their first time celebrating the Spring Festival. It's a wonderful way to connect them to the diverse world we discuss in the classroom," Helen Lee, assistant principal at TSESLA, told China Daily.

When Chinese Consul General in Los Angeles Guo Shaochun, along with Paul Baribault, president and CEO of the San Diego Zoo Wildlife



The San Diego Zoo made significant breakthroughs in improving the survival rate of panda cubs and successfully bred six panda cubs.

Chinese Consul General in Los Angeles Guo Shaochun

Alliance, or SDZWA, presented children with red envelopes and plush toys of golden dragons and pandas as a token of appreciation, the park echoed with the laughter of visitors.

The San Diego Zoo and its safari park have embraced the tradition of celebrating the Chinese New Year for several years, stemming from almost three decades of collaboration between the SDZWA and China.

"We share nearly 30 years of collaboration with our Chinese conservation partners. And together, we've helped transform the future of wildlife," said Baribault. "These moments in conservation are a

reminder that together we can make the 'impossible' possible for wildlife for people on the planet we share."

Guo, who said that the annual celebration was the first event he attended last February upon taking office, recognized that the San Diego Zoo serves as "not only an active participant in cultural exchange, but also a pioneer in wildlife conservation cooperation".

"It is the first American zoo to conduct giant panda conservation cooperation with China. The San Diego Zoo made significant breakthroughs in improving the survival rate of panda cubs and successfully bred six panda cubs," Guo said.

The San Diego Zoo initiated the first giant panda conservation project in the US in collaboration with China in 1996, when giant pandas Bai Yun and Shi Shi arrived from China. Male giant panda Gao Gao succeeded Shi Shi in 2003.

Since 1999, six giant panda cubs — Hua Mei, Mei Sheng, Su Lin, Zhen Zhen, Yun Zi and Xiao Liwu — have been born.

In 2019, the last two giant pandas, Bai Yun and Xiao Liwu, who once stole the spotlight at the zoo, returned to their ancestral home in China, leaving behind a legacy of conservation and shared commitment. Even today, their endearing

panda videos continue to be highly popular on the San Diego Zoo's website.

Megan Owen, vice-president of Wildlife Conservation Science at SDZWA, who has worked with the giant panda project for more than 25 years, believes that the partnership with China is significant in protecting the once-endangered bear species.

"Through these collaborations we have worked together to develop a number of innovations that have contributed meaningfully to the preservation of giant pandas, and we've also developed strong friendships along the way," Owen said.

She explained that the collaborative project has made great achievements in giant pandas' reproduction, such as developing a specialized milk formula that has increased the survival rate of cubs raised in the nursery, and the introduction of an ultrasound technique to monitor and manage panda pregnancies.

Highlighting the wildlife conservation efforts achieved by the zoo and its Chinese counterparts as a prime illustration of collaboration between the world's two largest economies, Guo committed to advancing people-to-people exchanges and fostering mutually beneficial cooperation for a new era in China-US friendship.

US expected to ease 2030 deadline on auto emissions

By **HENG WEILI** in New York
hengweili@chinadailyusa.com

The US may be decelerating its emissions-reduction timetable for cars and trucks, in what is being described as an attempt to address concerns by the auto industry and workers in a presidential election year.

"In a concession to automakers and labor unions, the Biden administration intends to relax elements of one of its most ambitious strategies to combat climate change, limits on tailpipe emissions that are designed to get Americans to switch from gas-powered cars to electric vehicles, according to three people familiar with the plan." The New York Times reported on Saturday.

US President Joe Biden's administration is set to ease proposed yearly requirements through 2030 of its plan to cut emissions and boost electric vehicle sales, two sources told Reuters on Sunday.

The reported easing of the rules comes in a presidential election year, as Biden attempts to navigate demands for climate action with the economic concerns of the auto industry and workers.

Automakers and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union last spring had urged the White House to slow the proposed push on EV sales. They argued that EV technology is



They (US automakers) had fallen all over themselves to make EVs, they're now trying to run the other way as fast as they can."

Dan Becker, director of the safe climate transport campaign at the Center for Biological Diversity

still too expensive for many mainstream American consumers and that more time is needed to develop the EV-charging infrastructure.

The UAW, which said last spring that it wasn't ready to endorse Biden's re-election bid, has been concerned about the switch to EVs because they usually are assembled by fewer workers than needed to make gasoline-powered vehicles. Many of the EV plants are being constructed in Southern states, which are less receptive to unions.

Last fall, when the UAW went on strike against Ford, General Motors

and Stellantis, with a major concern being the emphasis on switching to EVs, Biden became the first president to stand with workers on a picket line.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) later sent a revised version of its emissions rule to the White House, the Times reported, and the UAW endorsed Biden shortly thereafter.

Former US President Donald Trump, the leading contender for the 2024 Republican nomination, criticized UAW President Shawn Fain over the endorsement on Truth Social, his social media site.

"He bought into Biden's 'vision' of all Electric Vehicles, which require far fewer workers to make each car but, more important, are not wanted in large numbers by the consumer, and will ALL be made in China," Trump wrote.

In April 2023, the EPA proposed requiring a 56 percent cut in new-vehicle emissions by 2032. Under the initial EPA proposal covering 2027-2032, automakers were expected to aim for EVs to comprise 60 percent of their new-vehicle production by 2030 and 67 percent by 2032.

The EPA's revised regulation is expected to be made public as soon as next month.

An EPA spokesperson said the emissions proposal remains under

interagency review and that it plans to finalize a rule that is "readily achievable, secures reductions in dangerous air and climate pollution and ensures economic benefits".

White House climate adviser Ali Zaidi, who has held talks with automakers on tailpipe rules, said in a statement Sunday that the United States is "harnessing the power of smart investments and standards to ensure US workers will lead, not follow, the global auto sector".

The Alliance for Automotive Innovation (AAI), a trade group representing GM, Ford, Stellantis, Toyota, Volkswagen and others, last year called the initial EPA proposal "neither reasonable nor achievable" and urged "adopting requirements for 40 to 50 percent (electric, plug-in electric and fuel vehicles) in 2030".

EVs accounted for about 8 percent of US auto sales in 2023. Tesla, which has a nonunion workforce, by far leads in US sales of electric vehicles, which account for only 4 percent of Ford's sales and 3 percent of General Motors'. The Washington Post reported.

Some climate activists said the EPA's easing of the rules shows that longtime US automakers are not competing with Tesla and Chinese EV companies like BYD, CNN reported.

Automakers are "pretty much opposed to the rules," Dan Becker, director of the safe climate transport campaign at the Center for Biological Diversity, told CNN in an interview. "They had fallen all over themselves to make EVs, they're now trying to run the other way as fast as they can," he said. "They're trying to wring the last profits they can out of gas-guzzling vehicles."

In New Jersey, half of residents polled oppose plans to phase out the sale of new gas-powered vehicles by 2035, according to a Rutgers-Eagleton Poll released Monday.

"Even as a dozen or so states across the country adopt the same regulations, New Jerseyans are divided on the matter of electric vehicles and the impact they will have," said Ashley Koning, an assistant research professor and director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

"It is an issue that is heavily influenced not only by partisanship but also by a hesitancy that likely stems from a widespread lack of information about the vehicles themselves and what the policy entails — not to mention the financial implications and the notable change this would cause in people's everyday lives."

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China now S. Korea's top e-com selection

By FAN FEIFEI
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China became the top overseas direct purchase choice for South Koreans last year, surpassing the United States for the first time, which industry experts attributed to increasing demand from South Korean consumers for cost-effective commodities through Chinese fast-growing cross-border e-commerce platforms.

South Korean shoppers spent 6.75 trillion won (\$5 billion) on direct purchases of overseas products online in 2023, up 26.9 percent year-on-year, according to a report from The Korea Times, citing data from Statistics Korea.

Out of the total 6.75 trillion won spent by South Koreans on overseas direct purchases, China accounted for 3.28 trillion won, or about 48 percent, marking a whopping 121.2 percent increase compared to the previous year, the report said.

The US, which had held the top spot as South Korean shoppers' favorite overseas direct purchase option, ranked second. It took up 1.85 trillion won of annual transactions, or 27 percent, a drop of 7.3 percent year-on-year.

The report also said China's strength in the overseas direct purchase market is likely to persist for the time being, given that China's huge consumer market continues to expand alongside the



AliExpress sells Gangwon 2024 officially licensed products in Seoul, South Korea. YONHAP NEWS AGENCY

country's robust and efficient online shopping landscape.

China's cross-border online marketplaces such as tech heavyweight Alibaba Group's AliExpress and Temu — which is owned by online discounter PDD Holdings — are gaining popularity among price-conscious South Korean consumers with their cost-effective products and pervasive online promotions, experts said.

AliExpress and Cainiao Group, Alibaba's logistics arm, launched a seven-day express delivery service for oversized parcels in South Korea in early January. Consumers in South Korea can receive furniture, home appliances and other large-sized parcels within seven days.

AliExpress announced plans to invest about 100 billion won in South Korea last year in a bid to offer more attractive products and a better cross-border shopping experience for local consumers, as the online retailer has stepped up

its push to strengthen its presence in the growing cross-border shopping market.

The company has also launched a new service called "AliExpress Choice" in South Korea, which will provide customers with free shipping, free returns, delivery guarantees and even more affordable prices.

Temu, which offers a wide selection of Chinese-made merchandise, such as clothing, electronics, jewelry, shoes, handbags and cosmetics at competitive prices, made forays into South Korea in July. Launched in the US in September 2022, Temu now has a presence in more than 40 countries in North America, Europe, Asia and Oceania.

According to smartphone app market research firm WiseApp, AliExpress became the e-commerce app gaining the largest number of new users in South Korea in 2023. AliExpress garnered an average of about 3.71 million new users every month, with 7.07 million monthly

active users in South Korea in November, while Temu attracted a monthly average of 3.54 million users.

Zhang Zhouping, an independent analyst who has been tracking the cross-border e-commerce sector for more than a decade, said, "In recent years, Chinese e-commerce platforms have accelerated steps to expand their global footprint via offering shopping subsidies and launching promotional campaigns, increasing their influence in overseas markets, including South Korea."

High-quality affordable Chinese products are increasingly favored by overseas buyers, Zhang said.

"Chinese online retailers need to build their own core advantages in terms of price, service, quality, supply chains and logistics, have a deep understanding about relevant policies in local markets, and comply with local laws and regulations to ensure their brands are reputable," he said.

Key rate cut seen as move to prop up realty

25 bps slash in LPR biggest-ever; may further stimulate housing demand

By ZHOU LANXU
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China implemented the biggest-ever cut to a mortgage rate benchmark on Tuesday, indicating policymakers' dedication to bolster the struggling housing sector and the broader economy, with additional interest rate cuts likely on the horizon, experts said.

The over-five-year loan prime rate, on which lenders base their mortgage rates and long-term corporate loans, dropped by 25 basis points to 3.95 percent, the biggest cut since the rate started to serve as a benchmark in 2019, the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, said on Tuesday.

The one-year LPR, the benchmark for short-term loans, however, was left unchanged at 3.45 percent on Tuesday. The targeted cut to the over-five-year LPR alone, experts said, has delivered a clear policy intention of stimulating housing demand as home sales remain sluggish. In response, China's stocks closed higher on Tuesday.

Basic calculations indicate that Tuesday's cut can save about 150 yuan (\$20.84) in monthly payments, or about 52,000 yuan in total, for a new homebuyer availing a 30-year, 1-million-yuan mortgage.

"It's a relatively sizable alleviation of homebuying cost, which will encourage households to take on mortgages, boost consumer spending and facilitate a revival in the housing market," said Yan Yuejin, director of the E-house China Research and Development Institution.

Tuesday's cut has sent minimum interest rates of newly added first-home mortgages to a level below 4 percent, except for core areas in Beijing. In other words, mortgage rates in China will further decrease from a record low — the weighted average

of interest rates of new mortgages came in at 3.97 percent in December, the lowest since the record started in 2008, according to market tracker Wind Info.

Despite previous measures to stimulate the housing market, the area of residential properties sold in 30 large and medium-sized cities still dropped by nearly 7 percent from a year earlier in January, which may have necessitated Tuesday's cut, said Wu Chaoming, deputy director of the Chasing International Economic Institute.

"Easing is expected to remain the main tone of monetary policy," Wu said, as not only the property market is yet to bottom (out) but the challenge of insufficient demand remains acute, with deposit interest rates likely to further decline.

With the growth in the consumer price index, a main gauge of inflation, staying negative for four consecutive months to January as an indication of weak demand, the PBOC has stressed the need to keep price levels at a reasonable range in its fourth-quarter monetary policy report.

Wang Qing, chief macroeconomic analyst at Golden Credit Rating International, said the PBOC will likely cut the medium-term lending facility rate — a key policy benchmark of interest rates — in the near future as Tuesday's cut may not fully address the issue of low price growths and rising real borrowing costs.

However, Charlie Zheng, chief economist at Samoyed Cloud Technology Group Holdings, said the PBOC may remain cautious about cutting the MLF rate due to concerns over more weakness in the yuan.

"Without a rate cut from the US Federal Reserve, the PBOC may choose not to reduce the MLF rate."

Industry sees OpenAI's Sora as a game changer

By FAN FEIFEI

The emergence of text-to-video artificial intelligence technology has the potential to revolutionize advertising, movie trailers and short video industries, as Sora, a new AI model developed by US-based AI research company OpenAI — creator of chatbot ChatGPT — has recently become a global sensation, experts said.

They added the multimodal large language model, which possesses the ability to generate high-resolution video clips based on given text prompts, is an undeniable future development direction for generative AI, and will inject strong impetus into a new round of industrial development.

Chinese tech firms should pool more resources into accumulating more training data, improving computing capacities and cultivating talent in the field of AI-powered video generation models, said industry observers.

AI-related stocks continued to rally in the A-share market, with Chinese cloud video solution providers Hangzhou Arcvideo Technology Co Ltd and BizCon Telecom Co Ltd seeing their shares surge by the daily limit of 20 percent on the Shanghai bourse's STAR Market on Tuesday.

Sora can generate videos up to a minute long while maintaining visual quality and adherence to

user prompts, OpenAI said. It is able to generate complex scenes with multiple characters, specific types of motion, and accurate details of the subject and background. The model understands not only what the user has asked for in the prompt, but also how those things exist in the physical world.

Liu Xingliang, director of the Beijing-based Data Center of China Internet, a research institute specializing in the internet industry, said Sora is undoubtedly a major breakthrough for AI.

"It not only demonstrates AI's advanced ability to understand and create complex visual content, but also brings about unprecedented opportunities and challenges for content creation, entertainment and film and television production industries. The video-generation model will help video content creators to turn their ideas into reality at a faster speed and at a lower cost, and offer audiences richer and more diverse visual experiences," Liu said, adding that AI is expected to play a more important role in all aspects of human lives in the future.

He said with advancements in AI technology, traditional film and TV production processes along with related business models will likely be reshaped, but it does not necessarily mean the demise of legacy industries, and more efforts are

needed to explore new artistic forms and expression methods by integrating AI technology.

Chinese AI firms have stepped up the push to expand their presence in the AI video generation sector. Cloudwalk Technology said it has a layout in text-to-image and text-to-video multimodal LLMs and launched a digital human generation platform, while Sumavision said it has invested heavily in video content production, and will continue to explore AI-generated content technology.

Pan Helin, co-director of the Digital Economy and Financial Innovation Research Center at Zhejiang University's International Business School, said as a disruptive technology and milestone in AI progress, Sora will improve the efficiency of video creation, and have an impact on short-video editing and advertising industries.

"Talent, data and computing power are key to video generation



The text-to-video Sora model is on display on a smartphone with the OpenAI logo visible in the background in this photo illustration in Brussels, Belgium. NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

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"Talent, data and computing power are key to video generation

models," Pan said, adding the process of developing such models necessitates higher requirements for computing capacity, algorithms and high-quality data, and more efforts are required to bolster the circulation of data elements.

Meanwhile, the use of text-to-video AI models raises concerns about ethics, copyright protection, personal privacy leakage and data security, experts said. How to ensure the authenticity and transparency of the content has become an important issue, and more efforts are needed to formulate rules and regulations to ensure the healthy development of such technology.

Zhou Hongyi, founder of Chinese cybersecurity company 360 Security Group, said: "Sora might bring a huge disruption to the advertising industry, movie trailers and short video industry, but it may not necessarily beat TikTok quickly. It is more likely to become a creative tool for TikTok."

As estimated by professional services provider Deloitte, the A-share market will likely see about 260 to 330 IPOs this year. Last year, IPOs fell by 27 percent to 310.

According to market tracker Wind Info, ever since the registration-based IPO mechanism started its experiment at the STAR Market of the Shanghai bourse five years ago, nearly 40 percent of the 1,000 IPO applications have been either withdrawn or rejected.

The CSRC forums' participants also suggested that a fundamental improvement in A-share companies' quality should be achieved. To that end, delisting of disqualified companies will help.

They applauded the CSRC's latest crackdown on financial frauds and

insider trading by some A-share companies, saying that punishment for securities violations will help better protect the interests of retail investors and secure an open and fair market environment.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday, the benchmark Shanghai Composite Index gained 0.42 percent while the Shenzhen Component Index rose marginally. The combined trading value at the Shanghai and Shenzhen exchanges came in at 789.5 billion yuan (\$109.7 billion).

Following Monday's surge, listed artificial intelligence companies in the A-share market reported an even stronger average daily price increase of almost 7 percent, attributable to the continuing buzz about AI-based text-to-video generator Sora of US firm OpenAI.

Another reason for the market

Briefly

Xiaomi opens new factory in Beijing

China's smartphone maker Xiaomi has put into operation a new factory in Beijing's Changping district. The new facility, located in Xiaomi's industrial park in Changping, covers 81,000 square meters and can produce around 10 million handsets annually. It is also equipped with cutting-edge intelligent manufacturing technology. Most of the work at the factory will be done by robotic systems, ensuring round-the-clock operations.

Tianjin's cross-border e-commerce trade up

The port city of Tianjin reported a total cross-border e-commerce foreign trade value of 35.6 billion yuan (\$5.01 billion) in 2023, up

17.72 percent year-on-year, according to the municipal bureau of commerce. During the period, the city's cross-border e-commerce imports reached 6.83 billion yuan, up 12.06 percent year-on-year, while exports hit 28.77 billion yuan, marking a year-on-year growth of 17.89 percent.

Auto exports soar 47.4% in January

China's automobile exports jumped 47.4 percent year-on-year in January, industry data showed. A total of 443,000 vehicles were exported during the period, according to the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers. In breakdown, some 369,000 passenger vehicles were exported, surging 47.5 percent year-on-year.

XINHUA - CHINA DAILY

Experts: Sustain sound market show

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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Continued efforts should be made to optimize IPOs, further improve A-share companies' quality and regulate major shareholders' conduct, in order to ensure sustained sound performance of the Chinese stock market, experts said after reviewing the proceedings of a series of forums held by the market regulator.

From Sunday to Monday, the China Securities Regulatory Commission, the country's top securities watchdog, led by its new chairman Wu Qing, stressed the importance of strengthening capital market supervision, preventing and alleviating systemic risks,

and advancing the high-quality development of the capital market.

Efforts will be made to immediately address the concerns expressed by most of the market participants, said the CSRC.

The CSRC forums also solicited opinions from experts, scholars, individual investors, listed companies, securities firms, accounting firms, private equity firms and foreign financial services providers.

Forum participants suggested that A-share IPOs should be strictly controlled to ensure only good-quality companies get listed. They also said whole-process supervision over listed companies should be strengthened. If IPOs are not regulated well and

if rules of conduct for companies' promoters (founders) are not designed well, more problems may emerge in the subsequent refinancing or private placement activities, said Lin Yixiang, chairman of TX Investment Consulting.

Yang Delong, chief economist of First Seafont Fund, stressed that the registration-based IPO mechanism does not necessarily mean zero revision. Given the fact that individual investors make up most A-share investors at present, strict supervision over IPO applicants is needed and crackdown on fraudulent floats and financial frauds is crucial.

To avoid dilution of capital, the frequency of IPOs can be better con-

trolled based on the secondary market's capability, he said.

As estimated by professional services provider Deloitte, the A-share market will likely see about 260 to 330 IPOs this year. Last year, IPOs fell by 27 percent to 310.

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Following Monday's surge, listed artificial intelligence companies in the A-share market reported an even stronger average daily price increase of almost 7 percent, attributable to the continuing buzz about AI-based text-to-video generator Sora of US firm OpenAI.

Another reason for the market

upswing was that the People's Bank of China announced on Tuesday the over-five-year loan prime rate, on which lenders base their mortgage rates and long-term corporate loans, was lowered to 3.95 percent.

It is the first cut since June 2023 and also the biggest since the over-five-year LPR began to serve as an interest rate benchmark in 2019.

MingMing, chief economist at CITIC Securities, said that the lowered LPR is conducive to the bullish performance of the stock market, as this will lead to lower financing costs.

Chen Li, chief economist of Huancan Securities, said that the collective stock repurchases of A-share companies will help boost market confidence and facilitate the construction of a mature investment mechanism where value investment will be the major investment style.

BUSINESS

'New three' paves way for high-quality growth

Surge in solar, battery, NEV exports last year key to economy

By OUYANG SHIJIA
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China's pivot toward high-tech green industries as key growth drivers is gaining momentum, with experts predicting that the "new three" — photovoltaics, lithium-ion batteries and new energy vehicles — will play a pivotal role in shaping the country's economic landscape.

According to analysts, the rapid advancement of these sectors is poised to inject a renewed sense of confidence and dynamism into the world's second-largest economy. These industries are not only expected to drive growth, but also foster development of new productive forces, thus underpinning a shift toward high-quality economic development.

Louise Loo, lead economist at British think tank Oxford Economics, highlighted the strategic importance of the "new three" in driving high-quality growth, contrasting them with the more traditional "old three" industries — furniture, clothing and home appliances.

Official data reflect the marked shift with exports of the high-tech "new three" experiencing substantial growth. Exports of the "new three" of electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries and solar cells amounted to 1.06 trillion yuan (\$147 billion) in 2023, registering a year-on-year increase of 29.9 percent, said the General Administration of Customs.

Loo attributed the rapid growth in the three segments to favorable industrial policies, fiscal resource

“We estimate that these new industries and their related sectors upstream will make up around 11 percent of the country's GDP.”

Louise Loo, lead economist at British think tank Oxford Economics

allocation, and strong support for these industries. However, she cautioned that despite their growth, these sectors may not fully offset the challenges posed by other macroeconomic headwinds, particularly in the property sector, which may continue to correct for at least the next two years.

“We estimate that these new industries and their related sectors upstream will make up around 11 percent of the country's GDP,” she said. “Compared to the 20 to 25 percent GDP share of housing ... the growth in these 'new three' industries looks quite insufficient to fully offset some of the powerful drags that are coming from housing.”

Meanwhile, even though the three sectors still make up quite a small proportion of the country's GDP, Loo said she expects longer-term demand fundamentals to remain more or less intact, and that overcapacity concerns are really not as systemic as reported.

“Over the longer term, because of the productivity gains of these three new industries and the increasing economic share that they will enjoy in the economy, we expect that there will be a moderate pickup in productivity because

of the rise and sustenance of these new sectors,” she said.

“By 2027, the group of these new industries will eventually offset the drag from the more traditional sectors, such as construction and property. So this uptick in productivity over the longer term will also partially offset the incoming drags that we will see from a shrinking workforce, as well as diminishing capital returns that we see quite clearly in China.”

Looking forward, she believes that these industries will become an alternative growth driver for China, especially once the pain from the property drag plays out over the next few years.

Loo's views were echoed by Bloomberg Economics' chief economist Tom Orlik, who said it may take two more years of correction in the property sector, and China will have a real estate sector that is smaller as a share of the economy at the end of the process.

“It's more sustainable in terms of its future trajectory,” Orlik said. “It also means that China will have less productive resources, capital and workers focused on the real estate sector. So there can be more focus of productive resources on areas like EVs where there are very strong growth prospects.”

He said the booming emerging fields — such as EVs and sustainable energy — will offer continued growth opportunities for the Chinese economy.

Looking ahead, Shi Jianhua, deputy secretary-general of EV think tank China EV100, said the three new sectors will serve as sturdy engines driving China's future economic growth, and more efforts should be made to promote industrial upgrading and transformation as well as boost technological innovation.



Technicians of China Energy Investment Corp check equipment at the Dagang power plant in Tianjin. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Major power plant in Tianjin banks on green practices for greater efficiency

By ZHENG XIN
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For the past few decades, coal-fired power plants have powered factories and warmed up homes across the country, boosting China's energy market.

The Dagang power plant in Tianjin, a pivotal player in the national energy landscape since the commissioning of its first unit in 1978, has been one such.

The plant, once the largest single-unit capacity thermal power generator in China, has fostered industrial growth and supported economic development in North China for decades with stable and ample power supply.

However, as China accelerated its green and low-carbon energy transition in a bid to achieve carbon peak before 2030 and carbon neutrality before 2060, the Dagang power station, operated by China Energy Investment Corp, the world's leading coal supplier, has decided to adopt sustainable practices with advanced technology.

The power plant is currently undergoing technological upgrades aimed at enhancing overall efficiency and has introduced advanced equipment to maximize energy output while minimizing the environmental impact.

To replace four 328-megawatt units, the power station is constructing two high-efficiency ultra-supercritical coal-fired cogeneration units, each with a capacity of 660 MW.

The units will employ comprehensive dust removal measures. Emissions of sulfur, nitrogen and particulate matter will be significantly

lower than national standards, it said.

Additionally, the units' cooling method will also enable zero emissions of solid waste and warm water discharge to further facilitate marine ecological preservation.

Compared to existing units, the replacement will reduce the burning of 300,000 metric tons of coal per year, while cutting carbon dioxide emissions by approximately 700,000 tons, said Wang Song, chairman of the Dagang power station.

The planned replacement project has completed all preliminary supporting documents and policy procedures and is scheduled to start in October this year. Upon completion, these projects are expected to provide heating to an area of about 28 million square meters, he said.

In a bid to diversify its energy sources, the plant has also incorporated renewable energy solutions such as solar power. Distributed solar panels are now dotting the landscape surrounding the facility, harnessing natural resources to generate sustainable electricity.

Since it became connected to the grid in 2021, the 3.78-MW distributed photovoltaic system within the station has generated around 5.03 million kilowatt-hours, reducing carbon dioxide emissions by around 4,200 tons.

As China plans to phase down coal usage between 2026 and 2030, many facilities like the Dagang power plant are implementing advanced technologies to reduce emissions while adopting energy-efficient practices, said Lin Boqiang, head of the China Institute for Studies in Energy Policy at Xiamen University.

The process of phasing down coal in favor of cleaner energy sources involves not only integrating renewable energy sources, but also decommissioning outdated facilities. Such transitions contribute to environmental conservation and promote technological innovation, while creating new opportunities for sustainable economic growth.

The installed capacity of wind and solar power will exceed that of coal-fired electricity and account for about 40 percent of the total installed capacity by the end of this year, according to the China Electricity Council.

China's cumulative installed capacity of new energy power generation is expected to surpass that of coal for the first time this year, amid optimized power supply capacity and accelerated transition to green energy sources, said Dong Zengbo, deputy head of the council's statistics and data center.

The parent company of Dagang power station, China Energy Investment Corp, achieved a record in installed renewable energy projects last year, as the company accelerated its green energy transition while ensuring domestic energy security.

Power generation capacity last year reached 320 million kilowatts, with renewable energy accounting for 110 million kW, representing 35.5 percent of the total, said the company.

Its annual coal production reached 620 million tons last year, with coal sales reaching 830 million tons, contributing to about one-sixth of the national total, and ensuring stable domestic energy supply, it said.

Coca-Cola to 'keep investing' in Chinese market

By WANG ZHUOQIONG
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The Coca-Cola Company said it is committed to investing in China, highlighting key occasions and the sparkling sectors, as the nation drove the US beverage giant's global unit case volume growth in the fourth quarter of 2023, with strong momentum seen in the juices and coffee sector.

Coca-Cola said last week it posted a 7 percent year-on-year increase in revenue to \$10.85 billion in the fourth quarter, and a 10 percent rise in operating income to \$2.27 billion.

In terms of sales, global unit case volume grew 2 percent, with Asia-Pacific unit case volume expanding 2 percent, primarily led by China and India.

For 2023, the company's revenue climbed by 6 percent to \$45.75 billion, with operating income up 4 percent to \$11.31 billion.

In terms of categories, sparkling soft drinks grew 2 percent for both the quarter as well as the full year, primarily driven by growth in Latin America and Asia-Pacific.

In China, robust growth in Minute Maid Pulpy boosted the performance of the company's juice sector, which, along with value-added dairy and plant-based beverages, grew 6 percent for the quarter and 2 percent for the full year.

Coffee grew 3 percent for the year, fueled by strong performance of Costa Coffee in China and the United Kingdom.

“The year 2023 started very strongly in China; we had invested very heavily behind Chinese New Year,” said James Kincaid, chief executive officer of Coca-Cola, on an earnings call. “We had a very



An employee works on a Coca-Cola production line in Shenyang, Liaoning province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

\$45.75 billion

The Coca-Cola Company's global revenue in 2023

strong first quarter last year in China ... We are going to keep investing behind not just on key moments in the year but restoring more momentum to sparkling and really focusing on revenue growth management and execution opportunities.”

In 2023, the beverage maker made strides in iconic brands through product innovation, brand building and interactive marketing in the Chinese market.

To celebrate the Spring Festival that launches the Year of the Dragon, Coca-Cola partnered with paper cut artist Chen Fenwan on a Chinese New Year packaging design.

To better resonate with younger consumers, Coca-Cola Creations launched Coca-Cola Ultimate, inspired by games, and Coca-Cola Y3000 co-created with artificial intelligence technology last year.

Sprite also launched a limited-edition lemonade “Sprite 1982” in China last July, tapping the meme culture of young people to enhance interaction with consumers.

To keep pace with changing consumer demand, the company diversified its product portfolio

with a focus on nutrition and health improvement initiatives, including Coke Zero, orange flavor Fanta, the sugar-free Authentic Tea House, and the plant-based ready-to-drink Costa Coffee.

Zhu Danpeng, a food and beverage analyst, said Coca-Cola's performance was impressive, attributing it to the company's robust brand-building efforts targeting Gen-Z consumers. He said he is optimistic about the company's prospects for 2024.

“In 2024, they will continue to bank on their strengths in portfolio diversity, brand recognition and penetrated distribution channels.”

According to Euromonitor International, a market research institute, the carbonates and ready-to-drink coffee sectors in China have experienced growth in recent years, with carbonates increasing from 89.7 billion yuan (\$12.5 billion) in 2020 to 125.7 billion yuan in 2023 and forecast to reach 183.2 billion yuan in 2028.

Ready-to-drink coffee has grown from 9.9 billion yuan in 2020 to 10.7 billion yuan in 2023 and is forecast to grow to 13.7 billion yuan in 2028.

However, the juice sector saw a decline from 75.8 billion yuan in 2020 to 74.4 billion yuan in 2023 and will likely continue to drop to 71.6 billion yuan in 2028.

NEVs gear up toward intelligent driving

BEIJING — China's new energy vehicle manufacturers have achieved massive commercial success globally and they are now on a new frontier where electric vehicles are vying to become even “smarter”.

This momentum is driven by the country's tech firms specializing in artificial intelligence and smart hardware as they're striving to reshape the landscape of the NEV market.

Smart cockpit

Chinese smartphone maker Xiaomi unveiled its first NEV model SU7 last year, and it is expected to enter the market this year.

During the launch ceremony, the CEO of the tech firm exhibited SU7's intelligent elements, which include a Zoom Bird's Eye View, large-scale road modeling and a navigation autopilot system slated to cover 100 Chinese cities by the end of 2024.

This was immediately after Huawei launched its second electric vehicle Aito M9. The six-seater SUV features a futuristic smart cockpit running on Harmony OS, Huawei's self-developed operating system that serves devices in an internet of things era.

M9's electric version is priced at above 500,000 yuan (\$70,000) while a battery-electric minivan developed by Li Auto is expected to cost buyers the same.

A growing number of EV manufacturers in China have departed from low-price strategies that were once adopted by domestic carmakers.

Instead, they have found success primarily through emphasizing the selling points of an intelligent driving experience, which has resulted in substantial order volumes.

Self-driving era

At the 2024 Consumer Electronics Show, which concluded recently in Las Vegas, five out of 35 laser radar (Lidar) manufacturers that took part in the exhibition came from China.

Shanghai-based startup HESAI Technology and Shenzhen-based RoboSense released ultra-long-range Lidar capable of achieving 300-meter standard range measurement.

A total of 36 Chinese automakers have adopted Lidar as of the third quarter of 2023 and as many as 106 Lidar-equipped models, or about 90 percent of the world's total, are expected to be launched in China, according to statistics from Yole Group, a semiconductor industry consultancy.

The rapid growth of Lidar is driven by the surge in demand for L2 and higher-level intelligent driving. L2 stands for partial automation in a six-level system of driving automation. The thriving Lidar market indicates the arrival of a self-driving era in China.

Last March, China approved the commercial operation of autonomous driving services, allowing Baidu and Pony.ai to provide fully driverless rides without a safety supervisor aboard in a 60-square-kilometer area

of the Beijing Economic-Technological Development Area.

By the end of 2023, over 30 cities — including Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou — had issued road test licenses for autonomous driving.

Expanding infrastructure

The rapidly growing intelligent NEV market is a result of the country's steady investment in tech infrastructure.

A 56-kilometer smart expressway has started operation as a test section near Suzhou, Jiangsu province. A section of this smart expressway, spanning 6.5 km, was designed for self-driving vehicles of L4 automation.

As of August 2023, more than 20,000 kilometers of test roads for autonomous driving have been opened nationwide.

Information and communication infrastructure including the 5G network, high-precision maps and internet of vehicles platforms are lending vital technical support for the rise of intelligent vehicles.

“Going intelligent is the second phase of the ongoing automotive revolution,” said Zhang Yongwei, secretary-general of China EV100, an NEV industry think tank.

Without this approach, maintaining the first-mover advantage in the NEV industry becomes challenging, so car manufacturers must quickly join the trend to stay ahead, Zhang added.

BUSINESSFOCUS

Expos back in business across nation

Participation in key trade fairs, display spaces both exceed pre-pandemic levels of 2019

By ZHENG YIRAN in Beijing
and TANG YING in Nanchang

Ying Xiuzhen, a 75-year-old entrepreneur from Ningbo, Zhejiang province, has led her team to participate in expos ever since 1973. For her, the exhibition economy means a great deal.

"As a participant in the foreign trade industry, from 1973 till this year, I never missed a single China Import and Export Fair, even during the SARS period. Exhibitions help me know about the world, and most of our export orders were signed during expos," she said.

China's exhibition sector is on a quick growth track, as indicated by the increased number of such events, larger exhibition areas and more enterprise participation from both home and abroad.

According to the annual report on China's exhibition industry released by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, in 2023, China's economic and trade expos resumed to levels seen before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the number of economic and trade expos surging 117.1 percent year-on-year to 3,923. The number was 10.6 percent higher than the level in 2019.

The total exhibition area of such expos was 141 million square meters, 153.3 percent and 8.25 percent higher than the levels in 2022 and 2019, respectively.

Meanwhile, according to the report, enterprises have begun to venture overseas again to participate in expos and boost their market share.

Li Qingshuang, vice-chairwoman of the CCPIT, said: "The exhibition industry connects production with consumption, as well as supply with demand. It is an important platform for building a modern market system and an open economic system, and an important link in maintaining the stability and smoothness of global industrial and supply chains. It has become an important driving force for industry development and consumption upgrade."

Ying, president of China-Base Ningbo Foreign Trade Co Ltd, recalled the time when she took part in an exhibition in the 1990s.

"Back in the 1990s, factories did not have import and export operation rights. When we were off the plane from the China Import and Export Fair, right after the plane stopped at the airport in Ningbo, numerous factory directors were waiting for us, asking whether we got the orders and the number of the orders," she said.

"Now, with the three-year pandemic behind us, we are able to participate in exhibitions online. Using technologies, exhibitors can demonstrate whatever they want to demonstrate. For example, using real-time rendering technology, when a customer wants a bicycle but does not like the seat, we can adjust immediately. If he does not like the color of the handlebar, it is also adjustable. For a clothing company, they use artificial intelligence digital models, wearing different kinds of clothes to strut along catwalks. The color, style and texture of the clothing are all alterable," Ying said.



Above: Visitors learn about a product during the first China International Supply Chain Expo in Beijing in November.

CAI XIANGXIN / XINHUA

Left: Foreign participants check out gift items and other novelties during the China Import and Export Fair, also known as the Canton Fair, in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, in October.

LU HANXIN / XINHUA



Data from the CCPIT showed that as of Jan 9, more than 4,000 exhibitors had been applying AI, virtual reality and augmented reality in exhibitions. With the empowerment of technology and the resumption of offline exhibitions after the pandemic, the expo economy has resumed fast-track growth.

With China having successfully adjusted its contagion prevention and control measures, an increasing number of enterprises are going abroad to participate in expos. On

Jan 11, 2024, Domotex Hannover kicked off in Germany. Nearly 30 enterprises from Huzhou, Zhejiang province, participated in the expo with their best floor-covering products, to vie for the first batch of customers of the year.

Shen Weinan, from the foreign trade department of the Huzhou Municipal Bureau of Commerce, said: "For this year's expo, Huzhou enterprises set up an exhibition area of over 760 square meters. Their products mainly include wooden

flooring, wood plastic materials, bamboo and wood products, and artificial turf. Enterprises are offered subsidies of 70 percent of booth fees from the government."

2024 Heimtextil Frankfurt, which opened on Jan 10 in Germany, also attracted a great number of Chinese enterprises.

Fei Zhongfu, chairman of Rayri Hometextile (Jiaxing) Co Ltd, said: "Participating in overseas expos is the right choice, helping us actively integrate into global industrial and

With the reshuffle of industries during the three-year pandemic, Chinese enterprises are expected to play a better role in strengthening international supply chain cooperation and take part in global trade."

Lin Shunjie, Party secretary and board chairman of Beijing-based China International Exhibition Center Group

supply chains, and win orders. We have made updates to the fabrics and styles of the products exhibited this time, highlighting their comfort level. After the expo, we will fly right away to Cologne, to participate in the 2024 IMM Cologne."

According to the report from CCPIT, regions including Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei province, the Yangtze River Delta and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area are the hottest spots for exhibitions, taking up 57.35 percent of the national total in terms of the number and 63.27 percent of the national total in terms of exhibition area last year. In terms of featured industries, industrial and technology exhibitions ranked first among all in both the number and area of expos.

Another trend, according to the CCPIT, was that national-level expos — such as the China International Import Expo, the China Import and Export Fair and the China International Consumer Products Expo — have boosted the recovery of the overall exhibition industry.

Specifically, the first China International Supply Chain Expo, as the first national-level supply chain-themed expo in the world, was held between Nov 28 and Dec 2. The expo built a new open platform for the global business community to strengthen industrial and supply chain exchanges and cooperation. The number of visitors reached 150,000, with over 80,000 buyers and professional visitors. Among 515 exhibitors, there were 53 Fortune Global 500 companies and 57 Fortune China 500 companies.

Meanwhile, the report showed that the actual number and utilization rate of exhibition halls have significantly increased. In 2023, the number of exhibition halls that were actually put into use totaled 194, 58 more than the level in 2022 and 21 more than the level in 2019, setting a record high. In addition, the utilization efficiency of large exhibition halls has significantly improved. In 2023, a total of 40 exhibition halls held 30 or more exhibitions, up 122.22 percent on a year-on-year basis.

Lin Shunjie, Party secretary and board chairman of Beijing-based China International Exhibition Center Group, said: "To better position themselves in the global supply chain and take advantage of the exhibition economy, Chinese enterprises should think of what they can do in global industrial and supply chains, identify bottlenecks, enrich themselves and improve the quality of products and services. With the reshuffle of industries during the three-year pandemic, Chinese enterprises are expected to play a better role in strengthening international supply chain cooperation and take part in global trade."

According to the CCPIT, in 2024, the expo industry will continue to play an important role in economic recovery, and the international influence of China's exhibitions will continue to expand. The trend of specialization and differentiation in the exhibition industry will become increasingly prominent.

The pace of China's exhibition industry going global will be further accelerated, and the standardization level of the industry will be further improved. Furthermore, technological progress will promote the accelerated transformation and upgrading of expos, said CCPIT's report.

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Exhibitions eye greener, digitalized future

By ZHENG YIRAN in Beijing
and TANG YING in Nanchang

As the exhibition economy enters a new development stage, expos in China are marching in a more digital and greener direction, industry experts said.

Ten years ago, enterprises relied mainly on offline exhibitions to demonstrate their products and services and win orders. It was the exception that enterprises could land orders online without a single handshake. Now, with the help of digital technologies, enterprises showcase their products and services online, and make instant adjustments to their products and services according to customer demand. Countless such online transactions have since been made and are now becoming de rigeur across the industry.

Wu Yanfang, co-secretary-general of China Mobile Communications

Association Metaverse Consensus Circle, said: "With technological advancements, artificial intelligence is now empowering the exhibition industry in many aspects. Expos use AI to verify user photos, discover corresponding audiences on various platforms and use big data to distribute relevant content accurately in several ways. During the exhibition process, AI-enabled robots learn about the whole exhibition situation, and are able to offer guidance and services to visitors."

In addition, Wu added: "When visitors are at exhibitions, they can consult with AI-enabled robots. Visitors don't need to search for exhibitors using large arcane overview maps. With the help of AI, robots can have a comprehensive understanding of the exhibition in advance, improving the efficiency and experience of the entire undertaking."

In the new digital era, exhibitions undergo tremendous changes, from visitors to audiences to exhibitors, and in ways people interact."

Zhang Gang, chairman of Beijing EastFair Technology Co Ltd

Incomplete statistics from the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade showed that currently, more than 4,000 Chinese exhibitors are applying digital technologies, such as AI, virtual reality and augmented reality, in exhibitions.

Zhang Gang, chairman of Beijing EastFair Technology Co Ltd, said: "In the new digital era, exhibitions undergo tremendous changes, from visitors to audiences to exhibitors, and in ways people interact. Big data obtained during the process of organizing exhibitions and holding such events bring about the changes."

Another trend of exhibitions in China is sustainability. With people's increasing awareness of environmental protection, expos are turning greener. In the exhibition designing process, people are using environmentally friendly materials, including recyclable materials, biodegradable materials and low-polluting materials. The use of these materials can reduce environmental pollution and resource wastage.

Sam Lei, executive member of the Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute, said: "Sustainabil-



Visitors experience metaverse technologies during a science product expo in Wuhu, Anhui province, in October. DU YU / XINHUA

ity is the latest trend in the exhibition industry. We are promoting green and carbon neutral expos, and organizing relevant training, to lower energy consumption at such events as much as possible."

Li Qingshuang, deputy head of

the CCPIT, said: "Global industrial and supply chains are showing a trend of sustainable and digital transformation. So is the exhibition industry. With concerted efforts in the industry, the expo economy will be greener and smarter."

COMMENT

Editorials

Manila risks paying high price for brinkmanship fueled by Washington

As a small country, the Philippines has obviously had its head turned by the attention it has received from the United States, which is intent on usurping the Southeast Asian country's maritime disputes with China as a means to advance its "Indo-Pacific" strategy to contain China.

The Philippines' collusion with the US is not only raising tensions in the waters but it is also greatly heightening the risk of it careening into a head-on confrontation with China.

Showing the extent to which Manila is now under Washington's wing, the Philippines and the US are conducting three days of joint air patrols in the South China Sea this week. Given tensions are already high, thanks to Manila's recent incursive showboating in waters around Ren'ai Reef and Huangyan Island, this latest provocation is a clear goading of Beijing.

As is its wont in the face of such skylarking, Beijing is responding like-for-like. The Southern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army has organized naval and air force operations to closely monitor the actions of the stunt duo, according to a statement issued by the command on Monday.

This is not the first time Manila has engaged in joint sea and air patrols near disputed waters in the South China Sea with the militaries of countries from outside the region. Apart from such acts of braced bravado, Manila has also ramped up its provoking of China by repeatedly sending supplies to reinforce the disin-

tegrating warship it deliberately grounded on Ren'ai Reef in 1999 and is making waves by intruding into Chinese waters around Huangyan Island.

Egged on by Washington, which is happy for it to play the stooge, Manila should not misjudge the situation and go too far along what is a dangerous road. The PLA will maintain a high degree of vigilance to resolutely defend national territorial integrity and maritime rights, and firmly safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Thanks to the mutual efforts from China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the situation in the South China Sea has been largely calmed and stabilized in recent years. This has helped to nourish a conducive development environment for countries in the region, including the Philippines.

Manila should know the US is readily using it to sabotage peace and stability in the waters in its efforts to stymie China's development.

By playing along with the US' self-centered capers, Manila is harming the interests of all countries in the region, including those of the Philippines.

It is high time Manila stopped dancing with trouble. It risks paying a high price for its brinkmanship in the South China Sea if it continues to cavort under Washington's baton.

It should honor its word and de-escalate the situation in the South China Sea and do more to safeguard regional peace and stability, which would be to the benefit of all in the region.

US hawks put their egos before people's health

Jensen Huang, cofounder, president and CEO of Nvidia, declared recently "the technology divide has been completely closed" in computing, and identified biology as the next frontier of scientific and technological endeavors.

Washington agrees, viewing bioscience and biotechnology as a critical battlefield for maintaining US leadership, and Beijing sees them as crucial for its technological independence. With both governments highlighting the national security implications of biotechnologies, it is only to be expected that the two countries' competition in this area will only get ever fiercer.

Should politicization of this competition go to the extreme, however, as has happened with other frontier technologies, the potential damage may far outweigh all the anticipated benefits.

Some people in the US Congress are actually pushing for tough restrictions on Chinese biotech industry leaders. A number of Congress members are trying to shut out Chinese companies. Accusing four Chinese companies of ties with the military, they are calling for denying them access to any federally-funded undertakings. These companies have constructive working relations with their US partners, but are now labeled "foreign adversary biotech companies of concern" and risk being blacklisted by the US.

All of a sudden, the once mutually beneficial relations they have cultivated in the US market have become a threat to US national security thanks to the opportunistic jingoism of some China hawks.

Despite the companies' clarifications and the Chinese embassy's protests against "ideological bias",

there is no chance the companies will escape the crosshairs unscathed. Because, as Mike Gallagher, chair of the House Select Committee on competition with China, made very clear, for the armchair warriors in Washington this is "not just a supply chain battle or a national security battle or an economic security battle; I would submit it's a moral and ethical battle."

It is a battle that Gallagher said the US can't afford to lose, because who wins the competition will set the rules of the road. For Gallagher and his ilk, their self-set mission is to ensure it is the US that does that, if not by fair means by foul.

But as Abigail Coplin, a Vassar College researcher, has cautioned, US policymakers getting fixated on the technology's potential military applications are doing so at the cost of hindering efforts to cure disease and feed the world's population.

Rachel King, CEO of the Biotechnology Innovation Organization, the world's largest biotech trade association, has also warned corresponding legislation would "do untold damage to the drug development supply chain both for treatments currently approved and on market as well as for development pipelines decades in the making".

There is nothing new about the no-holds-barred attack on competitors to US companies in an emerging industry. It is basically a rinse-and-repeat of what the US did to Japan back in the day. But as Thomas Bollyky, the Bloomberg chair in global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, pointed out, what's concerning about the politicized attack on biotech companies is "we're talking about human health".

Coast Guard check proves the lie of Taipei's claim

Taiwan media outlets have reported that members of the Fujian coast guard boarded a Kinmen island tourist ship, carrying 11 crew and 23 passengers, on Monday to conduct a "routine check" that lasted about half an hour.

That's the first time personnel of the Chinese mainland's coast guard have boarded a Taiwan ship to perform their duties, which happened five days after two mainland fishermen drowned as a result of their vessel being chased from waters near Kinmen island.

The Fujian coast guard authorities' moves are legitimate and professional. There are no "prohibited" waters in the region as claimed by Taipei in a bid to justify its "law enforcement actions". The waters near the Xiamen and Kinmen islands belong to the same country with the central government in Beijing as its sole legal representative.

The "protest" the island's Democratic Progressive Party authorities ostensibly made to Beijing on Tuesday complaining the boarding check incident "hurt the feelings of our people, created panic among the people, and was not in the interest of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait" holds no water.

To begin with, it is the deaths of the two fishermen caused by Taipei's wrong and risky actions that have hurt the feelings and interests of people on both sides of the Strait, and created panic among them. The Fujian coast guard's move should serve to awaken the DPP authorities to the fact that the mainland has the legitimacy, resolve and capacity to suit its actions

to its words. The action is believed to herald the start of the regular patrols in the waters that the Fujian coast guard authorities vowed to conduct after the tragedy occurred. It is likely to be the beginning of a series of efforts the mainland takes to strengthen its maritime law enforcement in the waters.

Since the DPP authorities took power on the island in 2016, they have abandoned the 1992 Consensus that the two sides of the Strait belong to one China and left no stone unturned to seek the support of external forces for their "independence" cause, irrespective of the consequences of doing so. It is not the mainland that has taken the initiative to change the status quo across the Strait but the DPP authorities, which are eager to portray the island as a victim of the mainland's "bullying, coercion and threats".

Taipei is simply taking advantage of Washington's China-containment strategy to advance their own "Taiwan independence" agenda, betting the future of the island on US politicians' geopolitical gambling. Since the then US House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi's reckless visit to the island in August 2022, the DPP authorities should have been in a better position than any other party to realize that the space for their secessionist cause has been seriously squeezed.

Those still nurturing the illusion that the island can become "independent" by means of "salami" tactics will eventually realize that they are being paid back in kind. The island's reunification with its motherland is actually being realized step by step.

Luo Jie



Opinion Line

ROK leader and his country suffer from tilted diplomacy

Republic of Korea President Yoon Suk-yeol was scheduled to start a weeklong visit to Germany and Denmark on Sunday, but four days before the visit, the president's office told the media that considering various recent factors, Yoon is postponing the visit.

It is not clear what forced Yoon to postpone the visit at such short notice, but ROK media believe that the first lady accepting a luxury bag from a pastor could be a reason. Another likely factor could be the ROK's parliamentary elections in April. ROK media reported that some members of the ruling People Power Party to which Yoon belongs had expressed concern to the president's office that Yoon's scheduled visit to Europe would worsen public opinion about the party, putting it at a

disadvantage in the parliamentary elections on April 10.

The election marks Yoon's third year in office. It is rare for the president's party to lose a congressional election in the middle of a presidential term, but because of the controversies involving his wife and his government's poor approval rating, Yoon is taking the election seriously.

Since assuming office, the Yoon government has established a "diplomacy first" policy. In the past, the ROK pursued a foreign policy that matched its status as an "intermediate power", with the Korean Peninsula being its top priority. Now, the Yoon government has repeatedly said it will make the ROK a "global hub country", with diplomatic priorities shifting to the "Indo-Pacific" region. The

ROK has paid a heavy price for this adjustment. Not long ago, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea announced a change in its policy toward the ROK, saying the North and South no longer belong to the same nation, but are two hostile and belligerent sides.

Meanwhile, the ROK's economy continues to slide, with its economic weight falling from the previous 10th to 13th position in the world in 2022. In the first three quarters of 2023, the ROK's economic aggregate was surpassed by Mexico's.

Given that the "diplomacy first" strategy has not improved the ROK's economic and geopolitical security situation, Yoon's cancellation of the Europe visit should be seen as a no-better-option move.

— BEIJING NEWS

Providing win-win hopes in Munich

The "2024 Munich Security Report" released at the 60th Munich Security Conference that closed on Sunday conveys a sense of pessimism. The report believes that due to escalating geopolitical tensions and increased economic uncertainty, many countries are no longer willing to focus on the overall benefits of global cooperation, instead competing for relatively greater gains.

For example, the ongoing Ukraine crisis has triggered serious repercussions for European countries; some European politicians

describe it as a "turning point in the era".

Unfortunately, they lack a profound understanding of why they are losing out. In the absence of a sense of security, the West has been increasing its defense spending, making the world more insecure; to compete economically, the West resorts to protectionism, which could backfire.

For the West to break free from its security dilemmas, some people in the West need to adjust their mindset and adopt a more equal, reciprocal and inclusive attitude.

In his address at the Munich Security Conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi sent a clear signal that China is willing to be a stabilizing force to push for cooperation among major countries, deal with hotspot issues, enhance global governance and promote global growth.

With "stability" as the keyword of the conference, China is reassuring the world from the perspective of security and development, and also offering reference and guidance to overcome the "lose-lose" mentality.

— CHINA MEDIA GROUP

What They Say

West's 'nationalism' fuss nothing but an air kick

The video clip Lionel Messi uploaded on social media on Monday explaining his absence from an exhibition game between Inter Miami, the US club he plays for, and a local team in Hong Kong on Feb 4 should help to draw a line under the incident.

In the two-minute video posted on his China microblog account, the Argentinian soccer star attributed his no-show in Hong Kong to an inflamed adductor muscle that had worsened the day before the game. He denied that his absence was due to "political reasons", which he described as "false stories". After that he highlighted his "close and special relations with China", a country he has visited many times, and expressed his appreciation for the Chinese people's affection for him and his anticipation that he will visit China again soon.

The disappointment, if not anger, that arose as a result of Messi's absence in the Hong Kong match was largely caused by the lack of transparency from the organizer of

the match, Tatler XFEST.

Although no details of the contract have been even made available, Tatler XFEST should have been well aware whether Messi would play in the game or not and for how long and whether he would make a nonplaying appearance if injured, as these commercial contracts often strictly stipulate such conditions.

The strong reaction of fans to Messi's absence proved that the company's advertising for the game had given them the false impression that their idol's presence at the match was a certainty. That they asked for a refund of the ticket price is also a testimony to the fact that the tickets were bought on the premise they would get to see Messi.

Messi was absent from an exhibition match in Saudi Arabia a few days before the match in Hong Kong for the same reason, which the Hong Kong organizer must have known about. The public relations disaster could have been averted had the company been transparent about the situation

from the very beginning.

As such, that some Western media outlets simply tried to attribute the backlash sparked by Messi's no-show in the Hong Kong game to "the rise of nationalism" in China does not make any sense.

It is even absurd that some Western media organizations went further to try and drive a wedge between China and Argentina in their culture and sport cooperation, ignoring the fact that it was a US club that appeared in the match in Hong Kong.

China actually has a large body of soccer fans supporting Argentina. The tremendous success of the friendly match between Argentina and Australia in Beijing in June speaks volumes of the great potential of bilateral cooperation in people-to-people exchanges. Even the Australian side joked the Workers' Stadium of Beijing hosting that match was like a "home ground" for its opponent as the stand turned out to be a sea of blue and white.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

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COMMENT

David Gosset

For a warm spring of Sino-EU cooperation

Four days before the start of the Year of the Dragon, an interesting — and certainly auspicious — cultural event unfolded in Shanghai's historical heart, at the picturesque Villa Basset, the residence of the French consul general. The occasion was the launch of the book, *Inspiring Shanghai*, a publication I had the honor of editing and which underscores the vibrant dynamics and cultural exchanges between Shanghai and the world.

In my eyes, this event was not merely a book launch. It symbolized much more, especially in the address by Joan Valadou, consul general of France in Shanghai. Amid the architectural elegance of Villa Basset, Valadou highlighted the significance of 2024 for Franco-Chinese relations, a momentous milestone marking the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between France and China.

The event, by its very nature and the distinguished gathering it attracted — including diplomats from various countries and the European Union — served as a testament to the strong cultural and diplomatic ties that bind France and China. Yet its significance extends beyond the bilateral ties between these two countries. It serves as a clarion call for China to engage more deeply with regions across Europe.

As we commemorate 60 years of diplomatic relations between China and France, initiated by former French president Charles de Gaulle and Chairman Mao Zedong, our focus should extend beyond merely cele-

brating historical accomplishments. It is equally important to envision and embrace future opportunities.

The significance of 2024 as a milestone year offers an unparalleled opportunity for China to deepen its engagement with the EU. The need for such engagement has never been more critical, given the complex global challenges we face today — from climate change and economic disparities to geopolitical tensions and armed conflicts. Enhanced Sino-European cooperation can play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges, leveraging shared knowledge, resources and innovation.

The relationship between China and the EU is pivotal to promoting a multipolar world and strengthening multilateralism. As two of the most influential global actors — together they represent 35 percent of the world economy — their interaction shapes the dynamics of international relations, trade and global governance. The multipolar world, characterized by multiple centers of power, benefits from a cooperative China-Europe relationship, as it diversifies global leadership and reduces the unilateral dominance of any single country, encouraging a more balanced and equitable international order.

Multilateralism is significantly bolstered by China and the EU's joint efforts. Their collaboration within frameworks such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, and various climate change initiatives showcases a commitment to address

global challenges through dialogue and cooperation.

The implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals stands as a paramount endeavor for global progress. These goals, encompassing a broad spectrum of objectives such as eradicating poverty, ensuring environmental sustainability, and promoting peace and prosperity are essential for shaping a better future for our planet. The collaboration between the EU and China to pursue these goals is particularly significant. By pooling their resources, expertise and strategic visions, the EU and China will not only be able to accelerate the progress toward achieving the SDGs but also set a powerful example of global cooperation for the rest of the world.

China and Europe have also a shared responsibility to ensure the emergence of new technologies does not compromise human dignity. Their collaboration is crucial in setting ethical standards and regulations for technological advancements, including artificial intelligence, biotechnology and surveillance technologies. Both sides have unique perspectives and strengths that, when combined, can lead to a more balanced and humane approach to technology development. By cooperating, they can set guidelines that prioritize the well-being of societies worldwide. Their partnership is essential for fostering a technological future that respects and enhances human dignity, and ensures that innovations benefit humanity as a whole without

sacrificing humanistic values.

Furthermore, the China-Europe economic and trade relationship is vital for global economic stability and growth. Their mutual engagement in areas such as investment, the digital economy and green technologies not only enhances bilateral economic ties but also contributes to global economic diversification and resilience.

In essence, the China-Europe relationship underpins the promotion of a multipolar world and the effectiveness of multilateralism. By working together, China and Europe can lead by example, showing that international cooperation and mutual respect are the right way to solve the world's most pressing challenges. This partnership is essential for a more stable, prosperous and equitable global order.

As we look forward to what can be called a "warm spring of cooperation" between China and Europe, it is essential to recognize that such cooperation will be built on the foundation of understanding, respect, and mutual benefit. China's engagement with various regions across Europe should be seen not as a mere diplomatic endeavor but also as an opportunity to build a more interconnected and harmonious world.

The author is the founder of the China-Europe-America Global Initiative. He is the editor of Inspiring Shanghai published by Shanghai People's Publishing House (2024). The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Chen Haiming

Significance of 'harmony and peace' far beyond Chinese festival culture

The Lantern Festival, also known as Yuanxiao Festival, is a traditional Chinese festival celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first month in the lunar calendar, which marks the end of the Spring Festival. During this time, people gather to appreciate colorful lanterns, solve riddles, and enjoy sweet glutinous rice balls known as "yuanxiao". This year, the Lantern Festival will fall on Saturday.

The culture of "harmony and peace", embedded in the customs and tradition of Spring Festival, represents the spiritual core of Chinese culture. This cultural ethos provides valuable guidance in navigating relationships between individuals and nature, families, and society at large.

The Chinese people value the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, which is reflected in the traditional Chinese principle of "Unity of Heaven and Man" and lies at the core of the Chinese Lunar New Year celebration. Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said: "Man is modeled on Earth, Earth on heaven, heaven on Tao, and Tao on nature." Therefore, traditional Chinese culture views humans as an integral part of nature, and attaches great value to harmony between humans and nature.

For millenniums, the Chinese people have been observing Spring Festival to express their gratitude to Mother Nature for her bountiful gifts, pray for favorable weather and a fruitful harvest in the new year, and look forward to a prosperous and happy year.

Spring Festival culture also underlines the importance of family harmony and reunion. The yearning for family reunion is manifested in the travel rush, when China witnesses the largest internal human migration in the world with hundreds of millions of Chinese people traveling across the country to their hometown for the family reunion dinner. Customs such as honoring ancestors, having the family reunion meal, and gifting red envelopes with lucky money, reflect the Chinese belief in family values and the pursuit of concord, thereby fostering filial piety and love for the young.

Countries with different civilizations and systems should seek common ground while setting aside their differences, recognizing each other's legitimacy and respecting their respective differences.

In addition, the inclusiveness of Chinese culture encapsulated in a range of Spring Festival customs and rituals contributes to social peace and cooperation. Not to mention the vast river of Chinese culture is primarily nourished by the tributaries of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

The diverse customs and rituals observed by the Chinese people during Spring Festival reveal the spiritual essence of Chinese culture: harmony without uniformity. This approach allows for the exploration of common ground while respecting individual differences, thus playing a crucial role in maintaining social peace and facilitating cooperation.

The culture of "harmony and peace" has deeply influenced China's foreign policy. Since Chinese culture is shaped by the idea of "harmony without uniformity", its foreign policy places great emphasis on multilateralism, cooperation, consultation and win-win development in global affairs.

The concepts of "a harmonious world" and "a community with a shared future for humankind" proposed by China are based on the idea of "harmony without uniformity". By coexisting harmoniously, countries can thrive together, and address their differences.

The idea of "harmony and peace" is embedded in Spring Festival celebration, for it helps address many common problems facing countries across the world. Applauding Chinese traditional culture, Bertrand Russell once said that he believes it possesses "something of the ethical qualities in which China is supreme, and which the modern world most desperately needs".

Climate change, ecological crises and pollution are among the most pressing challenges facing the world today. The concept of green development, inherent in the notion of harmony between humans and nature, offers a promising approach to the international community to cope with these issues and forge a healthy and beautiful world.

In addition to the aforementioned environmental problems, humanity also faces regional conflicts, dreadful wars, anti-globalization movements and other challenges. At the root of these issues lies a lack of tolerance between different civilizations and countries, often fueled by extremism. Therefore, the Chinese philosophy of "harmony in diversity" is needed more than ever before.

Countries with different civilizations and systems should seek common ground while setting aside their differences, recognizing each other's legitimacy and respecting their respective differences. Only in this way can mutual respect, cooperation and win-win outcomes be achieved to jointly tackle the series of challenges facing humanity.

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of UNESCO says, "Cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature." As a proponent of cultural pluralism, China consistently emphasizes the significance of dialogue and exchanges among diverse cultures and civilizations by adhering to the principles of diversity, tolerance and inclusiveness.

With Spring Festival having been officially listed by the UN General Assembly as a UN floating holiday since 2024, the value of "harmony and peace" and the philosophical concept of "harmony in diversity" exemplified in the Spring Festival culture will gradually be recognized and accepted by the world, which in turn will promote global peace and development, thus benefiting humanity as a whole.

The author is a professor at and director of the Center for Global Governance and Law, Xiamen University of Technology. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Chen Zhi

China and US should join their strengths in AI revolution

The artificial intelligence leader OpenAI has unveiled a new AI model named Sora, which it asserts can generate "realistic" and "imaginative" 60-second videos based on brief text prompts.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly permeating every industry. In 2023, within two months of its launch, ChatGPT, a tool developed by OpenAI, ignited global competition in the AI sector. While the risks associated with AI have heightened regulatory concerns, it's evident the world is on the doorstep of a new era of AI development.

Beyond the core areas of chips and data, innovation in applications, especially in creating unique scenarios, is crucial. These will determine whether AI technology can truly transform into tangible economic value and complete the commercialization loop. In response to the challenge posed by ChatGPT, major global players and start-ups alike are rolling out new products. Google has introduced Bard, a chatbot, and integrated AI-enhanced features into its products, and Microsoft has launched Bing chatbot and introduced AI-driven collaborative tools in its products.

Compared with traditional AI, Generative AI has four major advantages: automation, personalization, creativity and interpretability. No wonder GenAI has become a driving force of the new wave of innovations.

From media to finance, healthcare to transportation, GenAI, as a representative of universal AI technology, is making inroads primarily into the "soft" aspects of the service and manufacturing sectors. The sectors with the highest potential value include retail, consumer goods, finance, pharmaceuticals and medical products.

On the other hand, AI-generated content (AIGC) and learning from data elements are enabling machines to autonomously generate entirely new texts, images, videos and other multimedia contents. Concentrated in creative sectors such as advertising, marketing, game creation and art design, AIGC is reshaping their future. As for customer services, multi-turn human-machine dialogues are enhancing user experience while saving the cost of manual customer service.

In medical technology, AIGC, based on real case data, can address the data scarcity problem, providing data generation services, among other things, for developing medicines, providing precision medicines, and facilitating magnetic resonance imaging. In chip development, AIGC-produced 3D models can help optimize the positioning of chip components, significantly shortening product development cycles to just a few hours.

AI applications in industries such as finance and education are in the early stages of small-scale pilots. AI can monitor, process and analyze large volumes of financial data, assisting financial institutions in making more accurate data forecasts and decisions. It can identify potential fraudulent activities, strengthening the security and reliability of financial transactions. Quite a few Chinese commercial banks are already using GenAI technology, advancing the practical application of large-scale models and AI technologies such as computing clusters.

As industrial-grade large-scale AI models gradually emerge, AI will become increasingly embedded in various stages of industrial production. General AI is being applied in design, intelligent manufacturing, quality management and autonomous driving. For instance, the integration of AI with electronic design automation is becoming a mainstream trend in chip design. AI large models enhance industrial robots' understanding of natural language commands, improving their information processing and perceptual execution capabilities.

Autonomous driving is a crucial part of the overall development of the auto industry, which has already been commercialized in California. General AI is also a key driver of humanoid robot development. At present, commercial services offer the fastest-growing market for humanoid robots. As for China, the domestic market has the highest potential for humanoid robots.

But embodied AI technology faces challenges such as high R&D costs and the absence of regulatory frameworks, which can make it difficult to achieve commercial viability.

But AI has created risks, too, including the risk of inappropriate use, which can raise user-privacy concerns, potential moral and ethical risks, and the resulting risk of stringent regulations.

Countries across the world are paying close attention to the impact of AI-induced productivity on the workforce. Various international organizations' assessments suggest professions such as office and administrative support, legal and financial positions are generally vulnerable to the impact of AI. And the OECD has warned that 27 percent of professions face the highest

risk of being automated.

In the global AI competition, both China and the United States prioritize AI, investing significant amounts of resources in the sector. The US holds a leading position in cutting-edge chip design, new algorithms and underlying technologies. It also has an advantage in the number of AI unicorn companies and top talents. But China's vast population, robust data collection capability, and continuous innovation of apps are propelling the development of the country's AI industry.

To be sure, for both China and the US, the path to AI development is challenging and requires substantial effort. If the two countries collaborate and complement each other in terms of resources, they can leverage their relative strengths to get mutual benefits, promote technological progress, and ensure the safe, trustworthy and reliable application of AI.

The author is director of and a researcher with the Institute of Innovation and Development, Chinese Academy of Science and Technology for Development. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY

GLOBAL VIEWS

HANY BESADA

Fulcrum of support

China is playing a pivotal role in strengthening South-South cooperation

China's role and contribution to the expansion and strengthening of South-South cooperation have become increasingly prominent and multifaceted. China's strategic engagement in South-South cooperation marks a significant shift in the landscape of global development highlighting its role as a key player in fostering economic growth, sustainability and mutual benefit among developing countries.

China's engagement with the rest of the Global South, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative and partnership with the Group of 77, underscores its commitment to working with other members of the Global South. This commitment is evidenced by its emphasis on aid, investment, trade and technology transfer aimed at fostering mutual development. China's approach to South-South cooperation is grounded in principles of mutual respect, equity and shared growth, with a focus on addressing the challenges of poverty, climate change and sustainable development.

China's collaborations in Asia, for example, demonstrate its significant influence and the strategic depth of its engagements with the Global South. Through investments and trade, China has become a vital partner for many Asian countries, helping to drive economic growth and infrastructure development in the region. However, this has also led to concerns regarding debt sustainability, environmental and labor standards, and the implications of economic dependency on China.

In its partnerships with G77 nations, China has advocated a tripartite proposition emphasizing independence, equity, justice, inclusiveness and win-win cooperation. This aligns with its broader strategy to leverage innovation, digital technology and green development to foster sustainable growth among developing countries. The commitment to technological inclusivity and the promotion of digital equality are central to ensuring that all countries benefit from the digital revolution.

The proposal to build a Digital Silk Road highlights China's dedication to advancing digital connectivity and fostering technological exchanges within the developing world. While this initiative promises to bridge digital divides, it also raises questions about digital sovereignty and potential technological dependency, necessitating a nuanced analysis of its impact on global digital inclusivity. For instance, in Africa, China's telecommunication company Huawei has partnered with local governments and companies to deploy 4G networks across the continent, significantly enhancing internet access and

digital services. The East Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy), a 10,000 kilometer submarine cable system deployed along the east and south coast of Africa, has been facilitated by Chinese technology and investment. This initiative offers countries high-speed internet connectivity, fostering digital inclusivity.

Through initiatives such as the China-FAO South-South Cooperation Programme, China has been instrumental in sharing agricultural expertise, enhancing food security, and improving agricultural productivity in partner countries. For example, China has dispatched over 1,000 experts and technicians to more than 25 countries, significantly improving agricultural productivity and food security. The triennial cooperation program between China and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has a fund of \$80 million, aimed at enhancing agricultural performance in developing countries. This illustrates China's commitment to sharing agricultural expertise and addressing global food security challenges.

China's engagement with the Global South also extends to environmental sustainability and climate action, with projects under the BRI emphasizing green development practices. China's green development projects under the initiative, such as the Solar Power Project in Malaysia, which is part of China's investment in renewable energy projects abroad, is worth noting. The project, with a capacity of 500 megawatts, contributes significantly to Malaysia's renewable energy targets. This example can help assess China's efforts toward its integrating environmental considerations into its cooperation with countries of the Global South.

Moreover, China's initiatives for cooperation with countries of the Global South



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

extend beyond political and economic cooperation to include addressing global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic showcased China's role in health diplomacy, particularly through its provision of vaccines and medical supplies to developing countries. China provided over 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines in total to more than 100 countries and international organizations, including a significant donation to the COVAX facility, showcasing its role in health diplomacy.

China's commitment to fostering cultural and educational ties with countries of the Global South is evident through scholarship programs and the establishment of the Confucius Institutes and exchanges that contribute to mutual understanding and strengthen people-to-people connections. The establishment of the South-South Global Thinkers, a global coalition of think tank networks for South-South Cooperation, co-hosted by the UN Office for South-

South Cooperation and the United Nations Development Programme, exemplifies China's role in facilitating knowledge exchanges and good practice sharing to tackle poverty and achieve sustainable development goals.

China's cooperation with countries of the Global South is closely linked to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations Development Programme notes the critical role of South-South cooperation in advancing global progress on the SDGs and has spoken highly of China's contribution through knowledge sharing, technical assistance, and support for climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

However, the impact of China's efforts varies, and some critics point to challenges related to debt sustainability and the need for more transparent and equitable partnerships.

In light of such challenges and criticisms, it is crucial to adopt a set of policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness, sustainability and equity of China's cooperation with countries of the Global South.

First, improving transparency and accountability mechanisms is essential to fostering trust and ensuring that the cooperation is conducted in an open and responsible manner. This includes the publication of project details, financial terms and impact assessments to allow for public scrutiny and stakeholder engagement.

Developing and adhering to sustainable debt practices is paramount to preventing financial overburdening of partner countries. This involves establishing clear guidelines for responsible borrowing and lending, ensuring that financial arrangements are aligned with the economic capacities and development goals of recipient countries.

Second, environmental safeguards must be strengthened to protect biodiversity and natural resources, incorporating rigorous impact assessments and sustainable development principles into project planning and implementation phases.

Third, promoting inclusive growth through South-South cooperation requires a concerted effort to ensure that development benefits are widely distributed, reaching marginalized and vulnerable populations. This entails a focus on capacity building, access to education and health care, alongside economic development projects to foster broader social and economic inclusion.

Last, enhancing cooperation on global health, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrates the importance of collaborative international efforts to address health crises. Strengthening health systems, sharing knowledge and resources, and ensuring equitable access to medical supplies and vaccines are critical components of a resilient global health architecture.

By addressing these challenges and implementing these policy recommendations, China's South-South cooperation initiatives can evolve toward more sustainable, equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships, contributing to the overarching goals of global development and cooperation.

In conclusion, China's role in South-South cooperation is multifaceted, offering opportunities for shared growth. While China's contributions have significantly boosted developing countries' development trajectories, there are challenges that need addressing. A balanced approach that considers the sustainability of debt, environmental protections, local empowerment and genuine mutual benefits is essential. As South-South cooperation continues to evolve, the global community must focus on ensuring that cooperation frameworks remain inclusive, equitable and aligned with the broader goals of sustainable development and global solidarity emphasizing the potential of China and its partners to advance global development objectives and contribute to a more interconnected and equitable world.

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NIU XINCHUN

Long-term pivot to the East

Arab countries' growing investment in China signals a strategic choice driven by both economic and political factors

In China-Arab economic relations, China used to be an investor in Arab countries, not the other way around. The United States has traditionally been the main investment destination for Arab countries. However, the situation has changed over the past few years, with China emerging as an increasingly attractive investment destination for Arab countries. Arab countries' investments in China have reached a level on par with Chinese investments in Arab countries.

It's worth noting that such a change is not a temporary adjustment, but a long-term strategic pivot driven by both political and economic factors.

Before 2020, there was hardly any capital from Arab states in the Chinese market. In 2021, Arab countries' new investments in China was a meager \$110 million. The figure surged by nearly ninefold to \$1.05 billion in 2022 and another 2.3 times to \$2.3 billion in 2023, approaching or even exceeding Chinese investments in Arab countries in recent years. It only takes Arab countries three years to increase their investments in China from the ground up to be on par with Chinese investments in Arab countries.

Currently, Arab countries' investment in China is still in its infancy, with a very low starting point. The Middle East's wealth funds spent almost \$89 billion on investments in 2022, according to data provider Global SWF. An outsized \$51.6 billion of that amount went into Europe and North America and only 1 to 2 percent of it went into Asia, mostly China.

Arab countries' newfound love for investments in China is first and foremost driven by the two sides' economic complementarity. The ultimate driving force is a common desire to achieve mutually beneficial and win-win outcomes.

Over the past three years, Arab countries' investments in China have mainly focused on the downstream industries of the traditional energy sector and emerging tech sectors. They are the "dual engines" driving

Arab countries' economic transformation, and both are indispensable.

On the one hand, the traditional energy industry and relevant industries are the starting point of and foundation for Arab countries' economic reform. Oil revenues have provided a steady flow of funds for their economic reform.

In this regard, the oil demand of China, the world's largest oil importer, has been rising while Europe and the US' oil demand has been decreasing amid the global energy transition. China now imports more oil from Saudi Arabia than Europe and North America's oil imports from Saudi Arabia combined. The future of the oil market is in China.

In the age of oil shortage, China tried to secure oil supplies. In 2004, China's Sinopec signed a cooperation deal with Saudi Aramco and Exxon Mobil to expand a refinery in South China's Fujian province. The deal, a typical case of "market in exchange for oil", was aimed at securing oil supplies from Saudi Arabia.

In an age of oil surplus, like today, when the global oil surplus capacity stands at 5 million barrels a day, Saudi Arabia is sparing no efforts to seize the oil consumption markets.

In 2022, Saudi Aramco signed an agreement with Chinese companies to form a joint venture to develop a fully-integrated refining and petrochemical complex in Panjin, Liaoning province, where it will supply up to 210,000 barrels of crude oil feedstock per day. In March 2023, Saudi Aramco agreed to buy a 10 percent stake in Rongsheng Petrochemical Co, one of China's refining giants, for \$3.6 billion. As part of the deal, it will supply 480,000 barrels of crude oil per day to the Chinese company. Also in 2023, Saudi Aramco announced to purchase a 10 percent stake in Jiangsu Shenghong Petrochemical Industry Group and a 10 percent stake in Shandong Yulong Petrochemical Co. At the beginning of 2024, the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation announced an invest-

ment decision to develop a \$6.4 billion petrochemical complex in collaboration with Fujian Energy Petrochemical Group Co Ltd.

Without any exception, these investments were all made under the premise that Saudi Arabian oil must be purchased. Getting deeply integrated with the Chinese market to seek new markets for Saudi oil is a major strategic move for the country to accomplish the economic reforms stated in the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy.

On the other hand, economic diversification and technology-driven growth are the ultimate goals of Arab countries' economic reform.

In this regard, China, the world's largest emerging market, now has the world's largest installed capacity for new energy and world-leading technologies in a number of areas.

Arab countries are investing in leading high-tech companies and new energy enterprises in China's primary and secondary markets, not only to acquire high profits, but also to bring back those leading technologies and production capacity to drive their domestic energy transition and economic diversification.

According to preliminary statistics, in 2023, investment agencies including the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, the Kuwait Investment Authority, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and the Qatar Investment Authority invested in more than 20 projects in China and have made it to the top 10 shareholders of circulation shares of 40-plus companies listed in China's A-share market. The investments are mainly focused on the burgeoning sectors of electric vehicles, new energy, the internet, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, smart infrastructure, pharmaceuticals and high-end equipment manufacturing.

In addition to the economic considerations, another important reason behind the Arab states' stronger push into China is the



WANG XIAOYING / CHINA DAILY

profound changes in international politics in recent years.

The Arabian countries in the Gulf region used to be US allies, with their economies deeply integrated with the US economy and they were highly dependent on the US on security issues. However, over the past decade, the Arabian countries in the Gulf region and the US have had growing conflicts and less and less mutual trust, with the latter withdrawing from the Middle East and showing rapidly declining interest in the region.

In particular, the US imposed sanctions on Russia and froze \$300 billion worth of Russian Central Bank assets in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, which was a great shock to oil-producing Arab states. The same could happen to Arab countries in the future — evidently, they realized that it is not wise to put all their eggs in one basket. According to a poll conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in December, nearly 70 percent of people in the Arab states think that the US has

become increasingly unreliable and they should pivot toward China and Russia.

Meanwhile, with US and European capital withdrawing from the Chinese market due to political reasons, the political relations between Arab states and China have been thriving, thus encouraging more Arab capital to make forays into the Chinese market.

The strategic pivot of Arab countries' investments is driven by their desire to free themselves from oil dependence, wean themselves off their over-dependence on the US, and embrace emerging countries, emerging industries and emerging markets. Such a strategic pivot will continue in the coming decades, resulting in booming Arab investments in China in the long run.

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Z WEEKLY



Cultural exchange flourishes in Riyadh

Confucius Institute in Riyadh fosters cultural exchange through Chinese language education, bridging diverse backgrounds and promoting mutual understanding in Saudi Arabia, **Li Xinran** reports.

A Confucius Institute, jointly established by Prince Sultan University and Shenzhen University, was inaugurated in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, in June 2023. It's the country's first Confucius Institute, and it has now kicked off its second semester.

According to Zhang Xi, 23, one of the two Chinese teachers at the institute, they had approximately 30 students during the previous semester, all of whom were beginners.

"About 90 percent of them have returned for this semester, which makes me very proud and content," she said.

Zhang graduated with a bachelor's degree from Shenzhen University in South China's Guangdong province last June, majoring in international Chinese language education, and had already enrolled in a master's program. However, she stumbled upon the institute's search for potential teachers, and she just had to participate.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn how to teach beyond classroom settings," Zhang said.

Xiao Xinxin, 32, is the other teacher at the institute, having obtained her master's degree in international Chinese language education at Shenzhen University.

Initially, Xiao didn't aspire to become a Chinese teacher. She pursued a double major in French and management at college. However, during an exchange program at the University of Padova in Italy, Xiao developed strong bonds with the students and faculty at the local Confucius Institute. "That experience influenced my decision to change career paths and pursue a master's in international Chinese language education," she said.

While Zhang primarily teaches students enrolled at Prince Sultan University, Xiao's students come from different countries such as Lebanon, Sudan, France, and Turkey, with diverse backgrounds including students from other universities, locals whose jobs require basic Chinese proficiency, as well as faculty and staff at the university.

"I believe their diverse life experiences contribute positively to our classroom dynamic. It's more constructive than just me lecturing while students taking notes," said Xiao. "It allows them to think critically, face challenges, and help each other out, which is extremely beneficial for the students."



Zhang Xi displaying a Chinese dragon at a cultural event at Prince Sultan University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Jan 29. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia, but Zhang noticed that most of the students are fluent in both Arabic and English, which she believes greatly aids their learning of Chinese.

"Their proficiency in English allows them to write from left to right, which is opposite to Arabic, and they are already familiar with the concept of 'be' verbs, which are present in both Chinese and English but not in Arabic," Zhang said.

While some students do find Chinese difficult to learn and occasionally display a lack of confidence, Xiao said that the course offers a precious opportunity for most of them.

For example, one of Xiao's students is from Lebanon and was coincidentally recruited. He ran into Xiao on the streets and inquired about Chinese classes. He expressed deep affection for China and Chinese culture and mentioned that he had been taking online courses but the schedule didn't work out very well. "Now, he is one of the most enthusiastic participants in class and always arrives first," Xiao said.



“It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn how to teach beyond classroom settings.”

Zhang Xi, 23, a teacher at the Confucius Institute at Prince Sultan University

Apart from learning the Chinese language and culture, Xiao observed a significant transformation among the students in the



“In the long run, training local teachers is more constructive than recruiting teachers from China.”

Xiao Xinxin, 32, a teacher at the Confucius Institute at Prince Sultan University

classes. Initially, the local students requested segregated classes by gender, but this wasn't feasible due to practical reasons. "At first, none of

the local students communicated with the opposite gender. But as the semester progressed, they began collaborating on group projects and even chatting with each other during breaks," Xiao said. "This is an additional value that our Chinese classes provide."

For Zhang and Xiao, the experience of living and teaching in Saudi Arabia also changed them.

"At first, I was very worried since I knew little about this country. I wondered if I had to wear a hijab and if I might inadvertently offend them," said Xiao. "But upon arrival, I found that the locals were very hospitable and polite. It is a country filled with people from all around the world."

Zhang also gained a deeper understanding of Saudi Arabia. "Safety was my biggest concern, but then I found that the laws are very strict here," she said. "Also, while it's inaccurate to say all Saudi people are millionaires, it is true that their welfare is well taken care of, and most of them seem quite laid-back."

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has been striving to transform and open

itself up, promoting infrastructure construction, and increasing interactions with other countries, including China.

"The Saudi government has been encouraging and promoting Chinese education, with the hope that the Chinese language will be included in the curriculum at various schools and different stages of education," said Xiao. "A group of local teachers will soon arrive at the institute for special training courses. In the long run, training local teachers is more constructive than recruiting teachers from China."

Xiao hopes that increased cultural exchange could reduce the psychological distance between the people of the two countries.

"The unfamiliarity is mutual, and we have much to learn about each other. As more and more Saudi people are beginning to learn the Chinese language and culture, I hope more and more Chinese people could also visit Saudi Arabia to see this lovely country for themselves."

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Igniting unity through a timeless card game

In the latest episode of *Youth Power*, titled "Igniting New Year's Eve: A Flavorful Twist Beyond the Dinner Table," I had the chance to play *guan dan* with peers from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the United States, introducing them to this classic Chinese card game.

The game involves four players forming two partnerships, seated opposite each other. Armed with a deck of 108 international playing cards, including singles, pairs, straights, full houses, and bombs, the players will try to skillfully play increasingly higher combinations, aiming to empty their hands before their opponents can.

Playing *guan dan* — literally translated as "throwing eggs" — is a tradition in my family during Spring Festival. Every year on Chinese New Year's Eve, after the family dinner, my grandpa would exclaim, "Time for *guan dan*!" And just like that, our cherished family tradition began.

We eagerly took our places around the table, ready to dive into the thrilling card battle.

The game not only brought us together but also sparked spirited competition, filled with laughter and joy.

Originating in my hometown, Jiangsu province, *guan dan* emerged in Hua'an during the 1960s. Its popularity spread to neighboring cities, captivating card enthusiasts, including those in Nanjing. Today, over 20 million people from Jiangsu and Anhui provinces engage in this game of strategy and skill. *Guan dan* has transcended borders, enthralled players not only across China but also worldwide.

However, *guan dan* is more than just a game. It encompasses a rich tapestry of Chinese philosophy, imparting wisdom while providing entertainment. Strategic thinking lies at its core, urging players to



Young people from four countries play *guan dan* in the latest episode of *Youth Power*, aired on Feb 10. DONG MING / FOR CHINA DAILY

adopt a holistic mindset. Before each round, we meticulously analyzed the landscape, crafting calculated judgments regarding the sequence and combination of cards. Much like the concept of holistic thinking in Chinese philosophy, *guan dan* demands consideration of various factors, facilitating astute decision-making.

While a number of players adhere to established patterns and sequences, true masters of the game dare to venture into uncharted territories. Breaking free from convention, they craft extraordinary combinations that disrupt opponents' strategies, leading them to victory. This principle also resonates deeply within Chinese philosophy, urging us to think outside the box and embrace innovation.

In the realm of *guan dan*, we learned that the strength of our cards did not solely determine success or failure. Just as in life, fortune

can smile upon us, gifting us with a favorable hand, or it can challenge us with a less-than-ideal one. However, our resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness will ultimately shape our destiny. *Guan dan* taught us that setbacks were temporary, and the true test of character lay in how we responded to adversity.

The game also fosters a strong sense of cooperation among players. As we strategized together, laughter, banter, and occasional friendly taunts filled the air. Through *guan dan*, we strengthened our bonds, nurturing the connections that held our family and friends together. Each victory and defeat became a shared experience, a cherished memory recounted with warmth and nostalgia.

As the scent of our Chinese New Year feast gradually dispersed, the echoes of our *guan dan* battles lingered in the air. The memories we created and the wisdom we gained

from this remarkable game will forever occupy a special place in our hearts.

More than a mere game, *guan dan* has become a repository of treasured moments, a testament to our unity, resilience, and the enduring power of family traditions. And so, as another lunar year begins, we eagerly anticipate the continuation of this cherished tradition — one that brings forth laughter, camaraderie, and timeless life lessons to all who embrace its captivating essence.

Written by Han Shuyuan, senior at Tsinghua University.



Online
Watch the video
by scanning
the code.

Z WEEKLY

Dining ratings: trust or trouble?

Debates arise over restaurant ratings' reliability as patrons turn to lower-rated spots, disrupting conventional dining norms and posing dilemmas for restaurant owners, **Gui Qian** reports.

It is a common practice to check review sites before settling on a new restaurant for a meal. But can we always trust these ratings? And does a higher score always mean better quality?

After renowned food connoisseur Chen Xiaoqing suggested checking out eateries with ratings between 3.5 and 4 points (out of 5) in an interview, a recent debate has ignited across Chinese social media. This sparked discussions on whether these slightly lower-rated spots might offer even better dining experiences.

More and more patrons, disappointed by the quality of numerous highly-rated restaurants, are now gravitating toward more modest eateries in hopes of uncovering unexpectedly delightful dishes.

Hashtags such as "Youth flocking to 3.5-point restaurants in a 'revenge culinary' trend" and "The best flavors might be hiding in less acclaimed dining spots" are buzzing on Sina Weibo, and accumulating millions of views.

Amy Wang (pseudonym), hailing from Qingdao, Shandong province, has a knack for discovering these "hidden gems" and she shares her insights on rating apps.

As a part-time food blogger, Wang has visited over 200 restaurants in just six months and even received the "Magical Comment Award" from Dianping, a major Chinese online platform for local services and reviews.

According to Wang, the trend of favoring lower-rated restaurants reflects a growing distrust in the rating system, especially among young diners. Ultra-high scores are not always reliable, as they can be artificially inflated through various means.

For example, some restaurants might offer incentives like complimentary dishes or discounts for positive reviews, and others might train staff to leave reviews on behalf of customers, or even pay for professional services to raise their scores.

"Even labels like 'locals' favorite' might be obtained through deceit — some places hire internet ghostwriters using local IP addresses," Wang explained.

Given these issues, food enthusiasts have realized that solely relying on ratings isn't the most dependable way to choose restaurants of better quality.

"The years a restaurant has been operating also matter, since most dining places struggle to survive beyond six months," Wang said. "An older establishment must be doing something right to thrive in such a competitive industry."

Reading through comments, especially the negative ones, can also be enlightening, according to Wang. "It helps you figure out if the criticism is about service, ambiance, or food quality, and whether you can overlook it. But you should also be wary of overly detailed comments with lots of words and pictures because they are often insincere," she said.

Sometimes, 5-star restaurants can be overrated, but that doesn't mean that poorly-rated ones always offer a stellar culinary experience.

As Wang pointed out, circumstances vary greatly in different places. In major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where nearly every aspect of life is tied to the internet's rating system, ratings can be reliable. Surprises are more likely in less-developed areas, where online ratings aren't as meticulously managed, and customers aren't as keen on sharing their experiences on social media.

Wang's most memorable experience at a "3.5-point restaurant" happened in a small town in Hanzhong, Shaanxi province. "I visited a place with only two reviews on Dianping, and to my surprise, I had the best *remipi* (rice slices) of my life," she recalled. "It shows that there are some undiscovered culinary delights yet to be acknowledged by the rating system."

Having worked in Beijing for over seven years, Wang still considers herself a *beipiao*, or "Beijing drifter". She focuses on exploring modest



The hot pot restaurant of Zhao Yige is decorated with a youthful aesthetic, incorporating trendy colors and slang slogans. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



“I hope this trend continues, pushing more shop owners to focus on what's truly important for a restaurant — taste and service.”

Zhao Yige, a restaurant owner



“Ratings are supposed to be helpful. They just need to be fairer and more representative.”

Tan Binbin, a restaurant consultant

eateries suitable for solo diners on a budget, dubbing her food blog account "Dagongren Meishi Tujian", or Illustrated Handbook of Food for Laborers.

Like most ordinary workers, especially young people, Wang doesn't have many opportunities for fine dining, but she enjoys grassroots foods like fried chicken, beef noodles, and *malatang*, a spicy Sichuan broth with meat and vegetables. "Eateries selling these foods typically receive lower ratings compared to

high-end restaurants. But I believe that authentic culinary delights are abundant in everyday life," she said.

Eat? Or not?

While ratings can sometimes confuse diners, they also raise concerns for restaurant owners.

Zhao Yige, 27, is a novice manager running a Chongqing hot pot restaurant in Beijing. Since its soft opening in early January, the store has received about 10 reviews on Dianping, all positive with at least 4

points. However, the overall score stands at 3.8 points, which Zhao finds disappointing.

She explained that review sites use complicated formulas for generating scores, which are not solely based on customer ratings. In this digital age, even a reduction of 0.1 points in rating can lead to reduced exposure, resulting in a drop in customers and revenue.

Bothered by the low score, Zhao plans to make changes. Once her restaurant officially opens after Spring Festival, she will purchase a membership with the review sites, which will allow her to access more features for business owners, such as uploading home page pictures and videos, as well as managing customer messages more effectively.

"I can tell that the review sites want restaurants to encourage customers to leave comments and make payments through the platform, both of which would boost scores," Zhao said.

According to her, highly-rated places also get certain privileges. For instance, only those with 4.5 points or above can sell group coupons on the platform.

"I feel caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, I know food quality is crucial, and customers don't want to be unduly influenced. On the other hand, ratings do matter, so despite my hesitation, I've instructed our staff to remind customers to rate us when appropriate," she said.

Zhao also has her eye on young people, who are active on social media and could become voluntary promoters for her store if guided

properly. She has decorated her restaurant with a youthful aesthetic, using trendy colors and slang slogans. She also plans to set up a dessert stall in the hall and conduct livestreams on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu.

Upon hearing about the trend of lower-rated restaurants getting more popular, Zhao welcomes it. "This shows that customers are becoming more discerning and hold more diverse standards," she said. "I hope this trend continues, pushing more shop owners to focus on what's truly important for a restaurant — taste and service."

A takeout tale

Apart from dining in restaurants, takeout is another common choice for daily meals, especially among young people. However, Tan Binbin from Chongqing noted that the trend of choosing moderately-rated eateries hasn't extended to the field of takeout.

Tan, formerly a manager of a leading takeout app in China, is now working as an independent consultant for takeout restaurants. He explained that the logic and algorithm of ratings differ between review sites and takeout platforms. For example, the rating system for food delivery platforms like Meituan and Eleme is much simpler — it uses a dynamically changing model that calculates the average points received over the past 30 days.

"This means the scores are mainly decided by customers rather than complicated rules set by platforms. It also allows restaurant owners to

quickly respond to low ratings and improve within a couple of days. Because of this, ratings on takeout apps are usually higher than those on review sites," Tan explained.

"For many takeout customers, 4 points is usually the lowest acceptable score. They think a rating lower than that indicates serious problems with the restaurant," he added.

According to Tan, customers' concerns about takeouts are even greater than those about regular restaurants. For example, hygiene is a primary worry, especially for places that offer only takeout with no dine-in service. These stores often operate in back streets or alleys, giving off an unclean impression. Heavy use of instant cooking packages is another issue.

Tan pointed out that rice bowls of braised pork, fish-flavored pork slices, and steamed pork with preserved vegetables are popular takeout dishes as common categories of precooked food.

Although the "low-rated restaurant trend" doesn't apply to takeouts, he said that he understands people's rebellious thoughts about the high ratings on platforms.

"We live in a world surrounded by ratings. We check scores and reviews not only when choosing a restaurant or ordering takeout, but also before online shopping and watching films," Tan said. "Ratings are supposed to be helpful. They just need to be fairer and more representative."

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Z WEEKLY

From high schooler to highlighter

A young vlogger, adept at sharing humor and sincerity, rises to fame, tackling diverse topics and empowering others along the way, **Meng Wenjie** reports.

"I never expected the video to be so funny until I clicked on it!" This comment is frequently shared by viewers under Lahongsang's videos.

Although she is only in her early 20s, Lahongsang (pseudonym) is a seasoned video blogger with eight years of experience, who has humorously documented her life. Growing up in the internet era as a Gen Z member, she's well-acquainted with video recording and social media sharing.

In 2016, while she was still in high school, Lahongsang started her journey as a vlogger on the Chinese platform Bilibili.

"I felt bored during that summer vacation after finishing my homework, so I decided to try recording my life through videos," she recalled.

Even though her very first video lacked professional editing, it humorously depicted a student's ambition for the upcoming semester, only waning as the school year progressed.

Despite being just a high schooler, Lahongsang consistently updated her content with diverse topics such as study, anime, snacks, weight loss, and makeup. She enthusiastically shared her life, creating a youthful vibe for her audience.

"As a vlogger, whenever I encounter something worth recording, I capture it," she said. "I'm not exactly sure what draws people to my videos, but many viewers say watching my videos makes them happy, so maybe that's it."

Her unique, sincere, and easygoing video style, along with her attention to life's details, has steadily increased her viewership from 100,000 to 10 million views. By the end of high school, Lahongsang had

amassed over 200,000 followers.

Despite her cheerful demeanor in videos, she admits that she is actually an introvert based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). However, she has kept on spreading positive and optimistic energy to her audience.

At the beginning of 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lahongsang's authenticity and positivity brought her to a broader audience. As a college student, she volunteered in her residential building, organized community activities, and even hosted a "cooking competition" in the neighborhood's WeChat group to lift spirits.

She documented this experience in a series of video diaries, showcasing the hard work of community volunteers.

This series caught the attention of mainstream media like CCTV, further elevating her visibility.

With a growing audience, Lahongsang started to delve into deeper subjects. For example, she released a video in October 2023, addressing "menstrual shame", aiming to empower women.

"The inspiration for this video came from my own embarrassing experience when my pants were stained with menstrual period and I was made fun of by some kids," Lahongsang said. "Later, when I came across the term 'menstrual shame' on social media, I realized I'm not the only one; many women are troubled by it."

But instead of lecturing or sharing personal views, Lahongsang documented her experience teaching a physiology class at a rural primary school in the video.

According to her, many local children

there are raised by their grandparents, who still hold the stereotypical concept of menstruation being "unlucky", leading to the children lacking proper physiological knowledge. Lahongsang had to try hard to guide the initially shy and joking children to engage seriously with the topic.

This video is part of her new series exploring different professions. Throughout the series, she immerses herself in various roles, including veterinarian, internet celebrity assistant, and barbecue restaurant server, humorously depicting the highs and lows of ordinary people's work.

As a member of Gen Z, Lahongsang enjoys exploring new things and embracing diverse experiences that broaden her worldview, as indicated by her Bilibili home page introduction: "Take on 100 different lives".

"With an increasing number of viewers paying attention to me, I hope to use my influence to assist more people, enabling my audience to journey alongside me into a different world," she said.

While her videos bring joy to her audience, Lahongsang's life isn't always easy. She has to struggle with creative inspiration and face negative feedback at times. She also feels disheartened when viewers trivialize the content of video bloggers, assuming documenting everyday life is easy. But in fact, each of her videos takes about a week on average from planning to release.

"While some scenes may appear to be everyday shots, the storytelling and main idea are meticulously crafted and planned," she said. "What viewers see is only the final product. Without witnessing the production process, they can't judge or undermine others' efforts."

Inspired by this experience, Lahongsang came up with the idea of documenting the stories of behind-the-scenes individuals. Over the past year, she has been involved in the production of dramas and variety shows, and she saw the significant effort put in by numerous people behind every captivating performance, often unseen by the audience.

"I want to highlight these unseen people through my videos," she said. "I'm presented with a valuable opportunity to share my experiences and convey my ideas through videos, and I intend to make the best of it"

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Lahongsang (pseudonym) brings joy to her audience by recording her life through videos. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Dameng (center) posing for a photo with local farmers. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Photographer transforming into avocado farming pioneer

By **LI YINGQING** in Kunming and **ZHANG XIAOMIN** liyqing@chinadaily.com.cn

Li Wei, 30, better known by his online alias "Dameng", manages an avocado orchard in Menglian Dai, Lahu, and Va Autonomous County of Pu'er, Yunnan Province. He uses his photography to promote the city, which sits on the border between China and Myanmar.

Hailing from Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, Dameng is a member of the Hani ethnic group. Three years ago, he was working as a travel experience designer and photographer, having visited over 30 countries. However, he felt drawn to his own ethnic group and decided to return to Yunnan to document local ethnic cultures.

After visiting several places, Dameng lacked sustained financial support, so he started looking for ways to use his skills to help local people and also make some money.

In October 2020, he arrived in Menglian, a town comparable in latitude to Michoacan, Mexico, a major avocado-producing region.

"When I saw avocado trees stretching from the mountaintops to the foothills, I knew I had finally found the right place that could accommodate me," he recalled.

In April 2021, Dameng planted his first batch of avocado seedlings. But for the first three years, he had to prune the avocados to encourage the growth of the trees, and only from the fourth year onward did the trees begin to yield fruit.

Since his own avocado trees have not yet borne fruit, Dameng has been purchasing avocados from local farmers, above market price, to sell through his own online and offline channels.

Using his expertise in photography, Dameng bridges the gap between consumers and the origin of the avocados, allowing them to see the fruits' growing environment and the growth process. His reverence for nature and ethnic culture earned recognition from consumers.

By the end of the local avocado harvest season in early January, Dameng achieved sales revenue of 1 million yuan.

Unlike many agricultural companies, which often maintain a purely leasing relationship with the local community, Dameng makes sure that all the income is shared equally between him and the local farmers who rent their fields to him. This, he believes, fosters inclusivity and equitable agricultural development.

Dameng is currently collaborating with 96 households of Va, Lahu, and Dai ethnic groups to plant 5,000 avocado trees, encouraging them to intercrop avocados in the front and backyards of their homes or in coffee fields, which not only maximizes land utilization but also diversifies income sources.

Ai Dan, for example, a 46-year-old Va villager, planted 200 avocado trees alongside his coffee crop, and last year had a bumper harvest of both coffee and avocados.

"I earned 10,000 yuan (\$1,389) from avocados and over 10,000 yuan from coffee. Planting two

crops on one piece of land is much more profitable," Ai said.

Dameng also educated local farmers on sustainable farming practices, advocating against the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. He initiated lessons on producing organic enzymes from fruit waste to enhance soil fertility.

In his spare time, Dameng likes to take photos of the locals, capturing their simple and vivid smiles.

His work, *The Va Girl and Her Avocados*, was published in a well-known magazine last year, and *Spring in the Ears*, featuring elderly Va women wearing wildflowers in their ears, won an award at the Chinese Ethnic Minority Photographer Prize last year.

In addition to photography, Dameng takes advantage of his experience as a travel designer. He offers a project where participants can pick seasonal fruits at the orchard, experience tea picking at the famed Jingmai Mountain of Pu'er, and visit the village of the Blang ethnic group.

He also ventures into developing cultural and creative products, with proceeds donated to rural public welfare initiatives.

Dameng said that many people envy his seemingly peaceful farm life, but the reality is quite different. He must deal with various challenges, such as expanding sales channels and improving product presentation and promotion.

"Whenever I feel lost and full of doubt, I like to take off my shoes and step onto the soil of the orchard. It grounds me like nothing else," he said.

“Whenever I feel lost and full of doubt, I like to take off my shoes and step onto the soil of the orchard. It grounds me like nothing else.”

Li Wei, 30, a photographer and avocado farmer in Yunnan



Dameng's photography work, *The Va Girl and Her Avocados*. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY