



Potato protector

Belgian expert helps Chinese farmers prevent crop disease **PEOPLE, PAGE 5**



Dazzling display

Glass artists preserve precious cultural heritage in Shandong **IMAGE, PAGE 7**

CHINA DAILY

HOLIDAY EDITION

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Year of Dragon off to a roaring start

Robust holiday consumption sets solid foundation for growth in 2024

By ZHONG NAN
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The growing spending power of Chinese consumers, combined with government policies to support shopping, tourism and cultural events during the eight-day Spring Festival holiday, will definitely contribute to sustaining China's economic growth this year, according to government officials and market analysts.

They said that the Spring Festival holiday, from Feb 10 to Saturday, is anticipated to be an unprecedented peak season for consumption, setting a vibrant tone for the Year of the Dragon.

Bolstered by a string of blockbuster films, Chinese cinemas, between Feb 10 and Thursday, had grossed more than 7 billion yuan (\$973 million), according to the movie information live tracker Beacon.

In addition, major tourist sites across China had received 123 million tourist trips since the start of the 2024 Spring Festival travel rush, representing a 22.8 percent increase compared with the previous year, China Media Group reported on Tuesday.

The strong start is expected to lay a solid foundation for economic growth in 2024, despite emerging challenges such as an aging population and reduced external demand.

Wu Fuxiang, director of the department of industrial economics at Nanjing University in Jiangsu province, said that consumption reflects economic growth, and the robust consumer spending during the Spring Festival holiday points to the ongoing improvement of the Chinese economy.

The uptick in consumption is expected to contribute to China's GDP growth in the first quarter, and will directly benefit related sectors such as retail, logistics, tourism and manufacturing, said Nie Pingxiang, a researcher at the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of International



Tourists enjoy the underwater wonderland at an ocean park in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, on Tuesday. Consumer spending during the ongoing Spring Festival holiday is setting a vibrant tone for the year ahead. HUANG FENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Trade and Economic Cooperation. Nie said that the expansion of these industries will, in turn, stimulate the growth of other sectors, creating a positive feedback loop along the industrial chain.

With electric cars becoming more popular among consumers in rural China, and an increasing number of people opting to travel to domestic as well as international destinations for cultural, artistic and sports tours, new types of consumption have flourished in China in recent years, becoming key drivers of consumption growth, said Sheng Qiuping, vice-minister of commerce.

These new types of consumption are empowered by digital technologies and represent green and healthy choices, Sheng said. He added

that the government will introduce a raft of measures this year, such as stimulating the purchases of vehicles and household appliances, to boost consumption.

Local governments across China are providing more than 600 million yuan in consumer discounts to promote cultural and tourism consumption during the Spring Festival holiday, according to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

The discounts can be used for a wide range of experiences, including performances, scenic areas, local delicacies, hotels and homestays, said Miao Muyang, head of the ministry's department of industrial development.

During the 40-day Spring Festival travel period, which began on Jan 26, the Ministry of Transport esti-

mated that a total of 9 billion passenger trips will be made. The vast flow of travelers will inject vitality into consumption and the national economy.

Dai Bin, president of the Beijing-based China Tourism Academy, said that the Spring Festival holiday has also seen a significant surge in outbound travel, as visa-free policies for Chinese tourists to popular destinations such as Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia have made international travel more accessible and convenient.

The positive momentum will offset the negative impacts of other economic factors, boosting market confidence and attracting foreign investment, said Sang Baichuan, dean of the Institute of International Economy at the Uni-

versity of International Business and Economics in Beijing.

Belinda Wong, CEO of Starbucks China, said that the US coffee giant plans to operate 9,000 stores on the Chinese mainland by 2025, following the achievement of surpassing 7,000 stores in late January.

Also upbeat about the Chinese market is Jerome Cottin-Bizzone, CEO for China at Pernod Ricard, a French spirits and wine group, who said the company will expand investment in its brands in China this year.

China's total retail sales of consumer goods, a major indicator of the country's consumption strength, climbed 7.2 percent year-on-year to reach 47.15 trillion yuan in 2023, data from the Ministry of Commerce showed.

Film puts justifiable defense in spotlight

By YANG ZEKUN
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Comments from experts, officials and the public about a movie centered on the theme of justifiable defense have called for grasping the essence of the legal concept to prevent unlawful behavior.

The film, *Article 20*, which is directed by Zhang Yimou, draws its name from Article 20 of the Criminal Law, which focuses on the sometimes contentious legal concept of justifiable self-defense.

Drawing inspiration from real-life cases of justifiable defense, the film has garnered widespread attention and resonated with the public as well as judicial institutions during the Spring Festival holiday. The movie calls for a nuanced interpretation of legal provisions and urges against compromising on unlawful conduct.

According to the Criminal Law, when a person, faced with an unlawful attack, takes action to protect his or her own rights or interests or those of others, and the attacker is thereby harmed, the defender will be considered to have acted in justifiable defense and will not bear criminal liability.

For some time, justifiable defense has been regarded as a "dormant clause", due to challenges in interpretation and the influence of misconceptions, such as "whoever is injured or killed is right".

Many online users have commented that the true meaning of the law should be to increase the liability for wrongdoers, rather than burdening good people.

Recent cases have shown that, for ordinary citizens, justifiable defense is no longer an illusory provision.

Luo Xiang, a renowned professor of criminal law at China University of Political Science and Law, said in a recent comment about the film that the public and judicial officers should avoid taking a "godlike" perspective or adopting a rational but armchair stance. Instead, they should consider the situation in which the defender was involved, empathize with the defender's position, and refrain from making excessive demands on the defender, Luo said.

See *Defense*, page 2

Putting safety first

A worker stands atop a train at a maintenance facility in Beijing's Chaoyang district on Wednesday while conducting an inspection to ensure the safe and smooth operation of trains on the high-speed rail line during the Spring Festival travel rush.

JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



Traffic between mainland, SARs surges

By ZHAO LEI
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Passenger traffic between the mainland and the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions reached a record high during the ongoing Spring Festival holiday, according to official statistics.

More than 144,000 passenger trips were made on the mainland section of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge on Tuesday, marking the busiest day for the section since the massive bridge opened in late 2018, said the border inspection station on the mainland side.

The travelers were carried by more than 18,000 buses and cars, which was a record for the most vehicles handled by any Chinese border port in one day, said the

inspection station, which is located in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, in a news release on Wednesday.

On Monday, the station recorded more than 130,000 trips — higher than any single previous day.

The travel peaks represented ever-increasing enthusiasm about intercity travel in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area during the Chinese Lunar New Year period.

Most people in the Greater Bay Area speak Cantonese and share the same social customs, consumption preferences and culinary habits. In recent years, thanks to the rapid growth of the service sector on the mainland, many Hong Kong and Macao residents have become used to spending their holidays or shopping in mainland cities.

Moreover, all restrictions on cross-border travel have been gradually abolished since the beginning of 2023, leading to the resumption of large-scale commuting between the mainland and the two special administrative regions.

All of these factors have contributed to the record-high travel between the two sides during the holiday period.

From Saturday to Tuesday, nearly 60,000 buses and cars went through the Zhuhai inspection station, with most of them owned by Hong Kong or Macao residents, according to Zhou Wei, an officer at the station.

He told China Central Television that a lot of people from Hong Kong "are fond of driving to mainland cities" for the Spring Festival holiday.

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WHEN STATE FIRMS TRY TO GIVE REALITY A UTOPIAN TOUCH

Enterprises' drive for high-quality development and a prosperous nation bringing concrete results

By ZHUANG QIANG
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Are China's State-owned enterprises drawing inspiration from *Peach Blossom Spring* — a fable spun by Tao Yuanming (365-427) of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420) — to illustrate how modern industry can play a constructive role in community and nation building to create what might be called a 21st-century utopia? Such a question might not be inappropriate this Spring Festival holiday, given the enterprises' recent record.

Historically, Tao is known as China's most famous recluse. His fable painted astounding views of a broad, flat landscape with imposing houses, lush fields, lovely ponds, rich mulberry trees and sprawling bamboo gardens, all

connected by paths extending among the fields in all directions. The imagery portrayed, it is said, impressed the fisherman who broke into Tao's Shangri-La by accident.

Most Chinese junior high school textbooks have enshrined *Peach Blossom Spring*, a nod to Tao's vision of utopia — a place without wars and filled with people's laughter and a harmonious and prosperous life.

Today's China, a land that has not waged or been embroiled in any war for decades, thanks to its emphasis on peace, diplomacy and development, resembles Tao's utopia. Led by the Chinese government and strengthened by SOEs in various fields, China might receive Tao's vote of approval.

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A poster for the film *Article 20* shows actress Zhao Liying portraying a deaf-mute mother. The movie has sparked discussion about the legal concept of justifiable self-defense. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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CHINA

FM to attend Munich security talks

Wang Yi will also visit Spain, France to consolidate strategic communication

By ZHANG YUNBI

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Foreign Minister Wang Yi will travel to Germany on Friday, to attend the 60th Munich Security Conference followed by visits to Spain and France.

Analysts said the trip to the three destinations — all key European Union member states and important Western countries — reflects the high priority Beijing attaches to the development of its relations with Europe, multilateralism and bilateral agendas in the new year. The Munich Security Conference

is an annual forum on international strategy and security policy with significant global influence, and China has sent high-level representatives to the conference in recent years.

Wang will deliver a speech at an event on China during the conference, presenting the nation's position on major international issues, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said on Thursday.

Wang "will elaborate on China's propositions on building a community with a shared future for mankind and on advocating equal and orderly multipolarity in the world", the Foreign Ministry said in a sepa-

rate statement, noting that the world is entering a new period of turbulence and changes.

Spain is an important country of the European Union and a comprehensive strategic partner of China. The two countries celebrated the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations last year. It will be the Chinese foreign minister's first visit to the country in nearly six years.

The Foreign Ministry said "both sides attach great importance" to the minister's visit, and the Spanish side has "made thoughtful and friendly arrangements".

"China hopes that this visit will further implement the consensus of the leaders of the two countries, carry forward the friendly atmosphere of the 50th anniversary of the estab-

lishment of diplomatic relations, consolidate mutual trust, enhance friendship, expand cooperation, and inject new connotations into the China-Spain comprehensive strategic partnership," it said.

Wang's visit to France — the last stop of his Europe trip that will end on Wednesday — is the first major official visit between the two countries this year.

China and France are both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and this year marks the 60th anniversary of their establishment of diplomatic relations.

As part of their joint celebrations, President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron exchanged congratulatory

messages last month.

Wang will hold bilateral meetings with the French side, and will chair a new round of the China-France Strategic Dialogue alongside the French President's Diplomatic Advisor Emmanuel Bonne.

"China looks forward to working with the French side to further deepen strategic communication, consolidate political mutual trust, expand practical cooperation and cultural exchanges, and strengthen communication and collaboration on multilateral issues," the Foreign Ministry said.

Beijing is ready to work with Paris to lead China-EU relations to a steady course and make contributions to world peace, stability and development progress, it added.

Book fair amplifies authentic China

By XING WEN

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The 14th Annual Spring Festival Joint Exhibition of Chinese Books in Global Overseas Chinese Bookstores is underway across 100 bookstores in 41 countries and regions.

Themed "Reading China", the exhibition is organized by China National Publications Import and Export (Group) Corp and China International Book Trading Corporation (CIBTC).

The literary extravaganza showcases a curated selection of acclaimed Chinese novels and scholarly works on China's governance, precisely tailored to meet the discerning preferences of overseas readers, according to the organizers.

Beyond the realm of literature, a range of cultural activities has also been organized. The activities include exchanges among authors, book signings and online book clubs, writing Spring Festival couplets, guessing lantern riddles, drawing Peking Opera face masks and painting traditional Chinese paintings. These events aim to provide overseas readers with an insight into Chinese culture in the new era.

"We have curated captivating photo exhibits showcasing diverse regions of China within the bookstores."

Jia Weilu, director of the overseas retailer service department at CIBTC's export center

This year marks the inaugural participation of bookstores from countries such as Venezuela, Cambodia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, according to Jia Weilu, director of the overseas retailer service department at CIBTC's export center.

In commemorating the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2024, the exhibition encompasses a focus on books elucidating China's multifaceted development over the past seven decades in areas encompassing economy, society, culture and technology.

Concurrently, the year 2024 also signifies the 60th anniversary of Sino-French diplomatic relations, therefore the joint exhibition has also prompted a series of cultural activities designed to resonate with this milestone.

In the French city of Champs-sur-Marne, primary school students have participated in a reading club centered around Spring Festival. Chinese scholars have been invited to share their insights into Chinese culture and customs at bookstores in Paris.

Given China's fervent promotion of cultural tourism, the joint exhibition also incorporates books introducing the rich cultural heritage and cuisine from various regions of China.

"We have curated captivating photo exhibits showcasing diverse regions of China within the bookstores. Additionally, we've also offered Chinese delicacies for visitors to sample. To encourage engagement, we've set up message boards within the bookstores, inviting visitors to share their aspirations for their dream destination in China," Jia added.

Since its inception in 2010, the Spring Festival Joint Exhibition of Chinese Books in Global Overseas Chinese Bookstores has been held each year for the past 14 years. The event leverages the advantages of overseas channels and the cultural significance of overseas Chinese bookstores, playing a pivotal role in narrating compelling Chinese stories and amplifying the authentic voice of China.

FROM THE FRONTLINE

Crane drivers keep trade flowing during festival

By TAN YINGZI

and DENG RUI in Chongqing

In the bridge crane operation center at Chongqing's Guoyuan Port, Hu Wanqi and his colleagues are busy moving containers around the yard via a long-distance operation system.

The bridge crane operators stare at their screens, stacking, moving, loading and unloading containers using joysticks and a computer mouse.

"We work around the clock during the Spring Festival holiday to ensure smooth transportation at the port," said Hu, the assistant director of the bridge crane operation department at Chongqing Guoyuan Container Terminal.

Situated on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, Guoyuan Port is the largest container river port in the country. The comprehensive transportation hub includes railways, highways and waterways, and is home to 16 ship berths that can handle vessels that can carry as much as 5,000 metric tons of cargo.

The port, which has attracted 10.5 billion yuan (\$1.6 billion) in investment, can each year handle 30 million tons of bulk cargo, and can facilitate as many as 1 million commercial vehicles each year to deliver or pick up cargo.

In 2023, the port had a container throughput of 990,000 twenty-foot equivalent units, a year-on-year increase of 2.9 percent.

Chongqing, a municipality of 32 million people, boasts key geographic advantages as a strategic transport hub in the national development program for China's western regions, as well as being an intersection point of trade and projects involved in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Yangtze River Economic Belt.

During his inspection trip to Chongqing in 2016, President Xi Jinping said the municipality would become an inland international logistics hub. "This is full of promise," he said while inspecting Guoyuan Port.

Hu, who operated a bridge crane to move a container from the yard to a ship in front of President Xi in 2016, is a National Model Worker who has been working in the field for 17 years.

An average bridge crane operator can move about 15 containers per hour, but Hu is capable of moving more than 25 thanks to his rich experience and superb skills.

In 2016, he worked with the technology innovation and long-distance operation system team to enhance the efficiency and working conditions of the operators. Now the operators no longer need to work inside the tiny driver's box on the bridge cranes themselves but in a comfortable indoor operation center.

There are 42 operators and 32 bridge cranes at the port, and one operator can control three to four bridge cranes at the same time, said Hu. "Safety is our priority, especially during the holiday," he added.

Besides routine daily checks on the machinery and the operation system, the operation center conducted a fire drill before the Spring Festival holiday.

Though container truck drivers will take breaks during the holiday and no new containers will come to the port yard by land, the bridge crane operators still need to unload and stack the containers from the ships to the yard.

"The port never rests," Hu said.

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Tourists experience the local bamboo dance with residents of Maona village, Hainan province, on Wednesday, in celebration of Spring Festival. GUO CHENG / XINHUA

High flight prices irk holiday travelers

By ZHU LIXIN

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With the eight-day Spring Festival holiday drawing to an end, some tourists to South China's Hainan province are discovering their return journeys are more expensive than they expected.

Many tourists have complained on social media that the prices for flights leaving the province have surged to unbearable highs, China Radio International reported on Thursday.

Several airlines have said their economy-class tickets for the last three days of the holiday, from Thursday to Saturday, had almost sold out, and that there were limited seats still available in business class.

While not an issue for those that have already booked their return journeys, the tourists yet to book their flights have been left with some tough choices.

"When I came to Sanya, the air ticket cost me only about 1,000 yuan (\$139). But now, to my great surprise, I have to spend more than 10,000 yuan for a return ticket," said tourist Juan'er in a post online.

"Such an expense is enough to cover a journey to Europe, so I decided to book an earlier ticket," a tourist surnamed Zhou from Beijing told thecover.cn, a news outlet based in Sichuan province.

Hainan's tourism and transportation authorities said the rush of tourists returning home from the island will continue until Monday next week.

According to multiple agents selling tickets for flights departing Hainan, the prices remain high until Saturday, the last day of the holiday.

The number of tourists visiting Hainan over the Spring Festival break has increased by 30 percent for the same period year-on-year, according to the island's tourism and transportation authorities.

Hainan's busiest tourism spot Sanya had 215,400 tourists booked into its hotels for Feb 10, Lunar New Year's Day, according to the city government.

Li Sixing, a manager at Sanya airport, said it had told airlines to use more wide-body airplanes for their flights to accommodate more passengers.

"While we are trying to increase airlines' carrying capacity, we sug-

gest tourists leave from Haikou if by air," Zhou Xinghua, an official with the provincial department of tourism, culture, radio, television and sport, told China Central Television on Thursday morning.

Haikou airport said its passenger flow volume for Friday is expected to surpass 120,000.

Zhou Xinghua also suggested leaving the island by boat as a possible alternative to flying.

To mitigate the strong demand for flights home, the Civil Aviation Administration of China has approved the increase in transportation capacity for Hainan, and airlines are currently submitting their plans, the CAAC said.

Hainan has not been the only destination to experience a travel bump during the Spring Festival break.

Data from travel platform Qunar shows that flights during the holiday booked from 186 small airports, those of third- or lower-tier cities across the country, had increased by nearly 200 percent year-on-year.

Among them, Foshan airport in Guangdong province had the highest growth with an increase in ticket bookings by more than 7 times compared to the year before.

Defense: Cases are often complex

From page 1

Ji Bingxue, a prosecutor with the Supreme People's Procuratorate, said in an article published on the SPP's WeChat account that the Criminal Law established the justifiable defense system in 1979 to provide an incentive for citizens to combat crime. Despite improvements in 1997, the system remained dormant for a significant period.

Beyond the statutory provisions, cases involving justifiable defense are often complex, with many lacking adequate evidence, leading to sometimes controversial determinations, Ji said. Additionally, precedents set in previous cases have influenced the application of the justifiable defense concept.

A high-profile case in Kunshan, Jiangsu province, in 2018 served as a wake-up call and caught the attention of judicial authorities regarding such cases. In that case, a

traffic dispute led to a knife-wielding motorist confronting another man. The motorist was killed, and police and prosecutors determined that the defender's actions constituted justifiable defense.

Since then, prosecutors in several places across the nation have applied the justifiable defense clause.

There has been public concern in such cases that has primarily focused on the criteria for determining justifiable defense versus excessive defense. The concern over justifiable defense reflects the public's demand for democracy, rule of law, fairness, justice and security, Ji said, adding that the principle of "not compromising with unlawfulness" must guide prosecutors in handling such cases.

"The judiciary serves as society's last bastion of fairness and justice; any faltering risks eroding public trust," he said.

Liu Zhe, a prosecutor from the Beijing People's Procuratorate, said that the existence of "dormant clauses" signifies a lag between legislative and judicial concepts, resulting in misapplications.

"The reliance on outdated judicial concepts inevitably leads to flawed cases. Persisting with such flawed precedents hinders progress, leading to an unjust status quo," Liu said.

Liu emphasized that judicial officers should possess critical thinking skills, dynamically understand the law's essence, and adapt to evolving societal needs to meet public demands for rule of law.

Making decisions departing from traditional precedents requires courage and accountability, Liu said, adding that judicial authorities must consistently support justifiable defense and intervention to empower the public to combat illegal activities.

Balancing act



Job seekers, including a father with his baby, register for work positions at a job fair held in Taizhou, East China's Zhejiang province, on Thursday. WANG HUABIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Traffic: Trip across bridge now a popular experience

From page 1

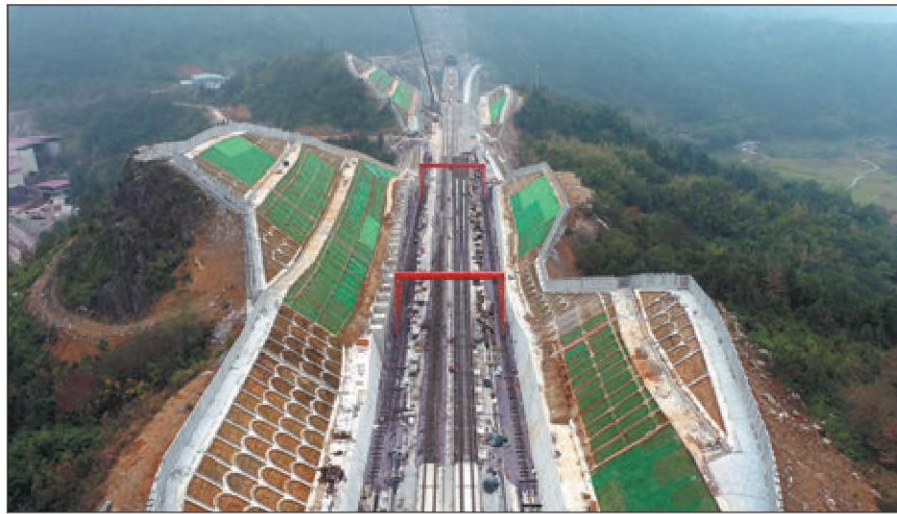
For many mainland holiday travelers, crossing via the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge has also become an attraction.

Li Jianquan, a resident of Zhengzhou, Henan province, told CCTV that he drove his family from

Zhengzhou to Zhuhai, and from there the family joined a local tour group and visited Hong Kong and Macao.

"The bridge makes it easier for traveling to Hong Kong and Macao. Besides, seeing the bridge itself from the tour bus is indeed a nice experience for us," he said.

COVER



Left: A drone image shows the construction site of the Hangzhou-Wenzhou High-speed Railway, a local HSR project built by State builders including China Railway 24th Bureau Group Corp. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY **Right:** Passengers in Jakarta, Indonesia, walk past a model of high-speed trains used on the Jakarta-Bandung Railway. FANG ZHE / XINHUA



From page 1

Take Lanxi, a county-level city in Jinhua of Zhejiang province, for example. In early January, when a cold wave swept across major parts of China, Lanxi's farmers were worried lot. Concerns over food security rattled the local government and SOEs, triggering an immediate response from the local power supply unit of State Grid of China. The SOE made sure electricity supply to key local enterprises did not get disrupted by the extreme weather.

Junlian Ecological Agriculture Technology Co Ltd, a local mushroom grower, was among the beneficiaries. Chen Shaorong, owner of the firm, said mushroom cultivation in the greenhouses requires exacting temperature and humidity controls. Even slight variations could affect the quality of the produce.

Junlian deployed its staff members to ensure its power distribution equipment like electrical meters and insulation covers were all securely installed and functioned normally. It also promoted electrical safety awareness, helping its farmers to regulate temperature and irrigation.

"Thanks to State Grid, we had stable electricity supply. We have no more worries for the rest of the winter," Chen said.

Junlian went on to establish an efficient WeChat-based response mechanism for local enterprises that practise smart farming in greenhouses, providing them with an online channel to ask questions or seek repairs. Besides, it develops personalized power supply plans for clients based on the latter's demand and electrical load.

These moves help farmers successfully meet rising demand for fruits and vegetables around the Chinese Lunar New Year holiday period.

Li Guoxiang, a researcher at the Rural Development Institute, which is part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said China's food security, though at a pretty high level, still faces many challenges. When there is extreme weather or a natural disaster, timely measures must be taken to reduce damage to agriculture.

Over the past few years, State Grid has been striving to provide stable power supply amid extreme weather and natural disasters, bringing benefits to China's agriculture, farmers and rural areas, as well as safeguarding the country's food security.

The Central Rural Work Conference in December recorded that China had overcome the adverse effect of some severe natural disasters in 2023, with food production hitting record highs and farmers' incomes growing at a faster pace — a glowing testimony to SOEs' contributions.

Central authorities doubled down

Infrastructure: SOEs create big impact with efficiency

on the ongoing infrastructure push to ensure the nation developed adequate capabilities to protect itself from natural phenomena.

In October, the nation's top legislature had approved the central government's plan to issue an additional 1 trillion yuan (\$136.93 billion) in special treasury bonds in the fourth quarter of last year. All of it was allocated to local governments through transfer payment for supporting post-disaster recovery and reconstruction, strengthening weak areas in disaster prevention and relief, and improving the overall ability to withstand natural disasters.

Infrastructure construction now plays a significant role in boosting the nation's economy. Most central SOEs in infrastructure construction boast impressive credentials, both at home and abroad, as they have accumulated decades of experience with projects not only across China but in the rest of the world.

For instance, China's numerous

“Thanks to State Grid, we had stable electricity supply. We have no more worries for the rest of the winter.”

Chen Shaorong, owner of Junlian Ecological Agriculture Technology Co Ltd, a local mushroom grower

SOEs were instrumental in the construction of mega projects like the Jakarta-Bandung High-speed Railway in Indonesia and the main 2022 FIFA World Cup venue in Doha, Qatar, which were both built under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

China Railway Construction Corp, which participated in the Jakarta-Bandung project, is going the whole hog to facilitate integrated development in the Yangtze River Delta Region by connecting more cities with the nation's HSR network.

The railway giant said in a construction report in January that laying work of the ballast-free track structure for the Hangzhou-Wenzhou High-speed Railway has been completed, marking another significant step toward the goal of scheduled completion of the entire project.

In some underdeveloped corners of cities, China's urbanization drive is receiving a shot in the arm from SOEs, which are sparing no effort to help promote livelihoods across the nation. For example, as the last con-

crete slab was placed on the capping beam of a residential building in Shanghai on Dec 16, the renovation project of an old urban residential community entered its new chapter.

With previous infrastructure facilities all in disrepair, Pengyi Community — one of the earliest groups of modern communities to rise in the metropolis in the 1950s and considered a “community of glory” as it was home to various industries' role models — is being redeveloped by China Railway 24th Bureau Group Corp, a unit of CRCC.

The State builder said in a construction progress report in December that capping work of all buildings has been completed, and the community will embrace its residents back before the next Spring Festival arrives.

The redevelopment project has a total construction area of 210,800 square meters. The completion of its capping work marks the solid foundation for future construction, the

progress report said.

The project has been given significance since its construction began, as it matters a lot to livelihoods of a large number of resettling families. According to CR24, upon completion, it will provide about 2,242 housing units. Various supportive facilities, including underground parking lots, spaces for exercises and business areas, are also included in the redevelopment plan, effectively addressing urban residents' resettlement concerns.

To offer more residents living-friendly solutions and ensure smooth occupancy upon the completion of the residential complex, the project includes a wide range of construction tasks, including civil engineering, interior and exterior design, and the installation of water, electricity and heating systems, all of which present challenges during construction.

The project builders managed to achieve timely delivery at every step of the construction process through smooth coordination, optimized construction procedures and reasonable scheduling. They also employed new approaches to reduce on-site operations, thereby minimizing material waste and environmental impacts.

During an executive meeting in late July, the State Council, China's Cabinet, approved guidelines on transforming and upgrading underdeveloped areas in mega-cities to support the economy.

The transformation of such areas is a positive move to expand domestic demand and increase effective investment. Residential renovation often comes with a slew of supporting projects such as commerce, education, hospital and elderly care facilities, said Yang Weiyong, an associate professor of economics at the University of International Business and Economics.

“These renovation projects can not only meet demands at different levels and make up for imbalances in urban development, but also help expand domestic demand and optimize the current structure of the real estate sector,” Yang said.

In January, China State Construction Engineering Corp, another State building major, finished redeveloping an old housing project in Beijing, in a community located in Huapichang Hutong.

“My new home has excellent lighting and ventilation now, and it is such a relief that finally there is an elevator in this building. My neighbors and I are all satisfied and extremely happy with our new house,” said Jin Guilian, who has been living in the community for decades, and is now busy decorating her house for Spring Festival 2024.

With the nation's high-quality development progressing steadily, Tao's *Peach Blossom Spring* could well be acquiring dimensions of reality.



A worker seen at a housing redevelopment project at the Pengyi Community in Shanghai. FANG ZHE / XINHUA

High-quality development unfolds on high-speed tracks

By ZHUANG QIANG

Decadeslong efforts for mastery in high-speed railways have made China, a latecomer to modern transport systems, a proud owner of the world's largest HSR network.

According to China State Railway Group Co Ltd, China's railway operator, as of the end of 2023, the total span of China's railway networks in operation exceeded 159,000 kilometers, including 45,000 km of HSR lines.

Involving many centrally

administered State-owned enterprises, China's rail development continued to progress last year, with the launch of more lines aimed at fostering socioeconomic development within the country and beyond.

In the Yangtze River Delta region, HSR projects are fueling the rise of the nation's economic heartland, where Shanghai and the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui reported a combined GDP of over 30.5 trillion yuan (\$4.24 trillion) last year.

The region now boasts a total rail-

way track length of over 14,000 km, including 7,100 km of HSR lines.

The rise in transport demand in the region was sought to be met by new HSR lines like the second Shanghai-Nanjing intercity HSR and local projects including the Jinhua-Jiande and Hangzhou-Wenzhou HSR lines.

Utilizing its mastery in related cutting-edge technologies, China has been building railways complete with long-span bridges and tunnels in challenging geological and climatic conditions. It has expanded HSR lines to remote and

ethnic minority areas to foster socioeconomic development.

For example, the massive Beipanjiao River railway arch is not only one of the world's highest railway bridges at 283 meters, but is also among the world's longest concrete arches ever built with a span of 445 meters. The crossing on the HSR line connecting Guiyang and Kunming is deemed a crown jewel of the bridge-building field.

HSR systems are symbolic of China's high-quality development, influencing all aspects of society. Last year, 3.68 billion railway pas-

senger trips were made nationwide, a record, China Railway said.

In addition, the nation's expertise in building HSR systems has gone global. The latest example is the Jakarta-Bandung High-speed Railway in Indonesia, officially launched in October. It is the first overseas HSR project fully utilizing Chinese railway systems, technology and industrial components.

With a design speed of 350 km per hour, the 142.3-km line substantially shortens the journey time between Indonesia's capital Jakarta and tourist city Bandung.

Since its launch, it has handled more than 1 million passenger trips.

“High-speed railway construction can boost various industries through the industrial chain, which is significant for China now as it is faced with a tepid domestic demand. With abundant capital flowing into the infrastructure sector, major projects such as HSR lines will continue to see booming development in the first several months of this year,” said Long Chaocan, an investment consultant with China Galaxy Securities Co Ltd.

WORLD

Stability seen as key factor in Indonesia poll

Subianto, set to win presidential race, to ensure political continuity, analysts say

By PRIME SARMIENTO in Hong Kong and LEONARDUS JEGHO in Jakarta

The imminent victory of Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia's presidential elections is seen to preserve political and economic stability in the country, with analysts noting that the candidate will continue the policies of the incumbent President Joko Widodo.

The General Elections Commission is yet to declare the official results of the Feb 14 elections, but quick counts by the country's top surveyors revealed that Subianto, the defense minister, has secured around 58 percent of votes, while his rivals Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo obtained 25 percent and 16 percent respectively.

Candidates for president and vice-president are voted under a single ticket in Indonesian elections. Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Widodo's son, is running as Subianto's vice-president.

Subianto, a three-time presidential candidate, declared victory in Indonesia's presidential election on Wednesday night.

"This is a victory for all Indonesian people. But I want to say that although we win, we should not be arrogant, we must stay humble. And I will embrace all parties," Subianto told thousands of his supporters at the Istora Senayan sports stadium in Jakarta.

Arya Fernandes, head of the department of politics and social change at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, said Subianto and Raka's wide lead against their rivals lends "legitimacy (to Subianto and Raka) and at the same time it gives the duo self-confidence".

Fernandes said Subianto's election as the country's eighth president will ensure a stable political situation and continuity, noting Subianto's campaign promise that he would continue Widodo's programs.

Widodo, who has been serving as president for 10 years, is stepping down from his post later this year



Indonesia's Defense Minister and leading presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto (left) delivers a speech with his running mate Gibran Rakabuming Raka in Jakarta on Wednesday. WILLY KURNIAWAN / REUTERS

with a nearly 80 percent approval rating.

He is widely credited for Indonesia's massive infrastructure development, including the construction of the China-funded high-speed railway — a first in Southeast Asia.

Mustafa Izzuddin, a senior international affairs analyst at Solaris Strategies Singapore, said Subianto's decision to run with the 36-year-old Raka is "a political masterstroke to capture as much of the youth vote as possible".

There are over 204 million registered voters in Indonesia, over 50 percent of whom are under the age of 40.

Mustafa said Indonesia's youth can be considered kingmaker in this year's elections, especially with the help of popular social media platforms where the Subianto-Raka pair campaigned heavily.

ASEAN supporter

Mustafa said Subianto's presidency will also bode well for regional stability, ensuring that Indonesia will remain a staunch supporter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

With the unofficial counts showing that Subianto crossed the benchmark of more than half of the total votes for the presidency, it can be concluded that Subianto "has won this election on a one-round basis by a landslide", Jeffrosenberg Chenlim, head of research at Maybank Indonesia, said.

Chenlim wrote in his research notes that a one-round election in Indonesia is the "best outcome for the market" as this will discourage opponents from pursuing serious election lawsuits.

"With a one-round election instead of two, Prabowo's government will preserve more political power so it does not need to share much of its power with opposition parties," he said.

Apart from electing the president and vice-president, voters also cast their ballots for local lawmakers in the elections on Wednesday. The election was peaceful, and civic leaders have called on citizens to maintain peace and harmony.

Marsudi Syuhud, deputy chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council, said Indonesians have to remain patient and optimistic while waiting for the release of official election results.

Leonardus Jegho is a freelance journalist for China Daily.

Xinhua News Agency contributed to this story.

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An injured person is taken to an ambulance following a shooting at a Super Bowl celebration event in Kansas City, Missouri, on Wednesday. CHARLIE RIEDEL / ASSOCIATED PRESS

1 dead, 22 injured at Super Bowl shooting

CHICAGO — At least one person was killed and 22 others injured in a shooting during the Kansas City Chiefs Super Bowl victory parade in Kansas City in the US state of Missouri, authorities said on Wednesday.

Stacey Graves, chief of the Kansas City Missouri Police Department, detailed the shooting at a news conference and said three people had been taken into custody. She added that fans might have been involved in apprehending a suspect, but could not immediately confirm that.

"I'm angry at what happened today. The people who came to this celebration should expect a safe environment," Graves said.

Police did not immediately release any details about the people taken into custody or a possible motive for the shooting. Graves said firearms had been recovered, but not what kind of weapons were used.

"All of that is being actively investigated," she said, adding that more than 800 law enforcement officers were at the scene.

"Shots have been fired around Union Station. Please leave the area," the Kansas City Police Department said on X, formerly Twitter.

Kansas Governor Laura Kelly, who had been evacuated from the rally site, posted on X that she encouraged everyone to follow instructions and updates from the police, local media reported.

Call for action

President Joe Biden was briefed on the shooting and will continue to receive updates, according to a White House spokesperson. White House officials were in touch with state and local leaders, and federal law enforcement was at the scene cooperating with their local counterparts.

Biden called on citizens to back

his call for Congress to ban assault weapons, saying that the deadly shooting at the Super Bowl victory parade in Kansas City "cuts deep".

"Today's events should move us, shock us, shame us into acting," Biden said in a White House statement.

The Chinese Consulate General in Chicago contacted the Kansas City Police Department and confirmed there was no Chinese citizen killed or injured in the shooting. Mass shootings are common in the United States, where the guns people own outnumber the population.

According to the Gun Violence Archive website, 656 mass shootings occurred in the US last year, and 18,854 deaths were caused by gun violence.

So far this year, 49 mass shootings have taken place in the US, and 1,957 people have been killed by gun violence.

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Germany overtakes Japan as third-biggest economy

TOKYO — Japan's economy is now the world's fourth largest after it contracted in the last quarter of 2023 and fell behind Germany.

Despite growing 1.9 percent, Japan's nominal 2023 GDP in dollar terms was \$4.2 trillion, government data showed on Thursday, compared with \$4.5 trillion for Germany, according to figures released last month.

The change in positions primarily reflects the sharp fall in the yen against the dollar, rather than the German economy — which contracted 0.3 percent last year — outperforming Japan, economists said.

The Japanese yen slumped by almost a fifth in 2022 and 2023 against the US dollar, including around 7 percent last year.

This was in part because the Bank of Japan has maintained negative interest rates in an effort to boost prices, unlike other major central banks that have raised borrowing costs to fight soaring inflation, media reported.

"The overtaking ... in size in dollar terms owes a lot to the recent

collapse in the yen. Japan's real GDP has actually outperformed Germany's since 2019," Fitch Ratings economist Brian Coulton said.

Germany's heavily export-dependent manufacturers have been hit particularly hard by soaring energy prices in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Europe's biggest economy has also been hampered by the European Central Bank raising interest rates in the eurozone as well as uncertainty over its budget and chronic shortages of skilled labor.

Japan is heavily reliant on exports, in particular cars, although the weak yen — making exports cheaper — has helped big firms like Toyota offset weakness in key markets.

But it is suffering more than Germany in terms of worker shortages as its population falls and birth rates remain low, and economists expect the gap between the two economies to widen.

Thursday's data showed that Japan's economy shrank an adjusted 0.1 percent quarter-on-quarter in the last three months of last year,

missing market expectations of 0.2 percent growth.

Growth for the third quarter was also revised downward to -0.8 percent, meaning that Japan was in technical recession in the second half of last year.

Japan "has not made progress in raising its own growth potential", the Japanese financial daily Nikkei said in a recent editorial. "This situation should be taken as a wake-up call to accelerate neglected economic reforms."

As Japan grapples with challenges, India is projected to overtake Japan in 2026 and Germany in 2027 in terms of output — although not in GDP per capita — according to the International Monetary Fund.

UK in recession

The news came on the same day as official data showed that Britain is in recession. The UK's GDP shrank 0.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023 after contracting 0.1 percent in the prior three months, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement on Thursday.

That places the economy in recession, which is defined as two quarters of falling GDP in a row.

While economists predicted that the recession could be short-lived, the data is a big setback for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who has placed economic growth as a priority.

In a broad-based decline, all main sectors shrank in the fourth quarter — with manufacturing and construction among the biggest drags.

The economy was broadly flat last year with 0.1 percent expansion, down from growth of 4.6 percent in 2022, the ONS said.

Finance minister Jeremy Hunt insisted the economy was on the mend, even if inflation stands at 4 percent, double the Bank of England's target rate.

"High inflation is the single biggest barrier to growth," he said after the release of GDP data. "Although times are still tough for many families, we must stick to the plan — cutting taxes on work and business to build a stronger economy."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Cease-fire urged in resolving Gaza crisis

By XU WEIWEI in Hong Kong
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The joint call for a cease-fire in Gaza against Israel's planned military operation in Rafah will resonate in the international community, reinforcing the urgency for humanitarian considerations in conflict zones, experts said.

In a joint statement issued on Wednesday, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and New Zealand's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon said they were gravely concerned over reports on Israel's planned military operation in Rafah, the last place of refuge for Palestinian refugees.

"We are gravely concerned by indications that Israel is planning a ground offensive into Rafah. A military operation into Rafah would be catastrophic," it said. "About 1.5 million Palestinians are taking refuge in the area, including many of our citizens and their families. With the

humanitarian situation in Gaza already dire, the impacts on Palestinian civilians from an expanded military operation would be devastating."

The prime ministers urged the Israeli government not to go down this path. "There is simply nowhere else for civilians to go," it continued, urging for an immediate humanitarian cease-fire.

Colin Mackerras, emeritus professor at Griffith University in Australia, said the joint statement has a positive impact, as "those three prime ministers have been quite reluctant to oppose Israel and they have been pro-American".

"We have to oppose Israel invading," he said. "The fact is that this is going to cause a lot of civilian casualties. It's going to be mainly aimed at ordinary civilians. And I think it's very immoral."

Mackerras said it looks like a genocidal war that is being waged. "The reason why I said that is because it looks to be aimed against people of a particular nationality," Mackerras

said. "Of course, they (the Israelis) say that it's all about opposing terrorism. To some extent, it is. But there are so many civilians killed or starved."

Hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians have been driven into Gaza's southernmost city by Israel's relentless military campaign, seeking shelter in a sprawling makeshift encampment near the Egypt border.

Despite pressure from foreign governments and aid agencies not to invade, Israel insists it must push into Rafah and eliminate Hamas.

French President Emmanuel Macron raised similar concerns in a phone call on Wednesday with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the president's office said, saying further forced displacements of people could also bring regional escalation.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said before talks with Netanyahu that people in Rafah with nowhere to go "cannot simply vanish into thin air".



A child gets a haircut in Rafah, Gaza, on Wednesday as Israeli strikes displace Palestinians from their homes. MOHAMMED SALEM / REUTERS

Should the Israeli assault on Rafah go ahead, the risk of atrocities is "serious, real and high," Alice Wairimu Nderitu, the United Nations special adviser on the prevention of genocide, said on Wednesday.

Fuat Emir Sefkatli, a researcher at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies in Turkey, said the joint state-

ment could "serve as a role model for Western countries in preventing the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and may trigger responses".

By collectively calling for a cease-fire and highlighting the catastrophic implications of military actions on civilians, these nations amplify the critical narrative that military solu-

tions cannot resolve underlying political conflicts, he added.

Arhama Siddiq, a research fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad in Pakistan, said the joint communique reflects a growing disillusionment with Israel's actions.

"This sentiment underscores a notable shift in perspective, even among Israel's traditional allies, toward recognizing the severity of the Palestinian plight, identifying it as nothing short of genocide," she said.

Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts continued on Wednesday, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan making his first visit to Egypt in over a decade. He said Turkey stood ready in cooperation with Egypt to help rebuild Gaza after the conflict.

The military offensive launched by Israel after Hamas' attack has killed at least 28,576 Palestinians in Gaza and wounded 68,291 others, according to the Gaza-based Health Ministry. About 1,200 Israelis were killed by Hamas attacks on Oct 7, according to official Israeli figures.

Agencies and Xinhua contributed to this story.

PEOPLE



Farmers carry early maturing potatoes and load them onto trucks in Qianxi county, Guizhou province, on May 3. The county has been working on developing early maturing potatoes to meet the needs of the market, bringing stable income for local farmers. Potatoes hold significant importance as a staple food in China. ZHOU XUNCHAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

A sentinel for China's potatoes

By CHEN WEIHUA in Brussels
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Francois Serneels became fascinated with China, when he read *The Blue Lotus* by his compatriot Herge, the Belgian comic writer famed for his *The Adventures of Tintin* series.

The book, published in the mid-1930s, satirizes common European misconceptions about China as well as criticizing the brutality of the then Japanese invaders.

It was the first book Serneels had read about China.

"Visiting China was a childhood dream," says Serneels, quality and environment manager of the Center for Agronomy and Agro-industry of the Province of Hainaut, CARAH, in southern Belgium. "I always wanted to visit China."

His long-awaited first trip to Asia came in his second college year in 1980 when he visited India, and in 1984 he went to work in Thailand for two years, telling himself that he was halfway to China.

However, it would not be for another 15 years before he would finally set foot in China.

Serneels, who turned 64 on Dec 26 — a birthday he notes coincides with that of Chairman Mao Zedong — has visited China more than 60 times conducting agricultural technology exchanges and, more specifically, to help Chinese farmers fight potato late blight disease.

It all started when Serneels came across an advertisement in a Belgian agricultural journal in 1999 about organizing a delegation from the Wallonia region to attend an international agricultural exhibition in China. He learned by chance that an international conference on plant protection would be held there a week earlier, so it seemed perfect for him to attend the two events, with airfare and hotel rooms both covered.

Serneels, then director of a CARAH training farm, presented the technique of an early warning system to control potato late blight, a serious potato disease that caused huge yield and quality losses for potato crops in China and many other developing countries.

"To my surprise, a lot of Chinese agronomists were very interested," he says. He then realized that he had been wrong to think that the potato was just a Western staple. In fact China was — and remains — the world's biggest potato producer.

In fact most potatoes are grown in Asia, Serneels says. China produces more than 90 million metric tons of them a year, about a quarter of the world's total, while India trails with some 50 million tons.

He made some China contacts during his first trip and within a few months began receiving Chinese delegations in Belgium. Several months later he returned to China on his second trip.

It was a trip to the remote countryside in Chongqing municipality in Southwest China at a time when some farmers being relocated because of the Three Gorges Dam were learning how to grow potatoes as their new crop, but potato late blight that destroys the plant was a serious problem.

Food security

"It was a question of food security for the people," Serneels says.

With a new Chinese friend, Che Xingbi, an agronomist from Chongqing, Serneels started to introduce and set up an early warning system for potato late blight. It first started on a small scale in Wuxi, an underdeveloped mountain county in Chongqing. Now the early warning system covers more than 14 Chinese provinces, the aim being to help prevent late blight and increase yield.

In having Che as a friend and colleague Serneels feels particularly blessed. They have been connecting with each other every week for more than 20 years now, he says.

He has made frequent trips to China over the past 20 years, sometimes three and four times a year, bringing with him other Belgian agronomists as well as his students.

He has been busy training local Chinese technicians on the early warning system for potato late blight as well as on the latest techniques for growing potatoes.

"We are the sparks, and the engines are the Chinese agrono-

An agronomist helps set up a system that protects against a devastating crop blight, and as he does so sees a country's transformation



Francois Serneels (right), quality and environment manager of the Center for Agronomy and Agro-industry of the Province of Hainaut, or CARAH, and two other Belgian experts receive the Friendship Award of the Chinese Government from Chinese Ambassador to Belgium Cao Zhongming (second from right) at a ceremony in the Chinese embassy in Brussels on Nov 10, 2022. CHEN WEIHUA / CHINA DAILY

mists," he says of the work by Chinese technicians to popularize the technique across China.

Serneels says he is unable to speak for all of China, but in the areas he has visited he has seen great attention being paid to potato cultivation in the years since he first came to the country. Farmers are now more willing to invest in growing potatoes thanks to their newly gained ability to control potato late blight, he says.

"It helps farmers to make great progress, and it's very important."

Despite the huge progress, Serneels says, the potato yield in China is still low by European standards.

He attributes this to the fact that the potato is a "technical crop".

"If you grow potatoes without any scientific management you make several big mistakes," he says.

One problem is balanced fertili-

China and can destroy a crop in just two or three weeks. The third is to ensure seed quality to grow healthy and strong potatoes.

Producing healthy seed potatoes can be rather complicated, and work is done in the laboratory to get a seed potato uninfected with a virus.

To achieve that, technicians cut the very end of the sprout that is uninfected. They then put it in a medium to grow in the laboratory into a small plant, called a microtuber.

"The technique is widely used in China, but not used by all the farmers," he says, adding that many Chinese farmers are unaware of this technique.

Serneels says that the next big challenge for Chinese potato farmers is balanced fertilization, which he says is a weak part of the country's potato production.

He underlines how important potato is as a crop for arid regions such as Ningxia and Gansu and mountain regions in Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan and Shaanxi provinces.

"If potatoes are not growing well, people go hungry."

Unlike rice, potatoes can grow on relatively arid land because they require less water and do not require flat land, as is the case with paddy fields.

Serneels says he has been amazed by the ways that Chinese eat potatoes. During his first trip to China in 1999 he met a Chinese agronomist who wrote a book on the 300 ways Chinese eat potatoes.

"They are very different to what we have in Europe," he says.

He described some Chinese potato dishes as very good, but he does not think many Europeans would appreciate french fries being dipped in sugar, as some Chinese do. And of course Belgians are proud of their famous fries, the nation's favorite snack food.

Because of his outstanding contribution Serneels was awarded the Chongqing Friendship Award by the Chongqing municipal government in 2015. He was named by the Chinese government in 2018 as one of the 40 Most Influential Foreign Experts During 40 Years of China's

Reform and Opening Up.

At the Chinese embassy in Brussels in November 2022 he received the Chinese Government Friendship Award. Receiving the award with him were two of his compatriots, Johan Erauw, an emeritus professor of law at Ghent University, and Jacques Crommen, an emeritus professor at the University of Liege known for his work on traditional Chinese medicine.

As Serneels has contributed to the fight against potato late blight over the years, he has witnessed the transformation the country has gone through. Buffalos plowing farm fields, a scene that was ubiquitous when he first visited the country, is hard to find these days, he says, because these animals have been replaced by micro-tractors.

Twenty years ago, he says, lights were the only thing that consumed electricity for farmers. Now every household is equipped with many appliances, from electric fans and refrigerators to TV sets and computers, to make life more comfortable.

By contrast, in many villages that he has visited in India there has been little change over the years, he says.

"I see the same misery," he says, including people starving and some even sleeping under bridges.

"That's something you don't see in China."

Serneels gives China great credit for the way the benefits of economic growth are shared among the population, although income inequality is an issue, he says.

Most Europeans lack access to accurate information about China, he says, and European news media coverage of the country is poor.

"That is why I am very happy to take my students to the field in China because when they come back it completely changes their way of seeing China. There's been a revolution."

It is essential for young people to visit other countries to have direct exchanges with local people, he says.

He plans to bring another group of his students to China, possibly as early as April, and says he hopes to have Chinese students visiting him in Belgium soon.

"If potatoes are not growing well, people go hungry."

Francois Serneels, a Belgian agronomist



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From left: Francois Serneels chats with his long-time Chinese friend and cooperation partner Che Xingbi during a trip to Gansu in August. Francois Serneels visits the potato field in Gansu in August. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY. Farmers harvest autumn potatoes in Luliang county, Qujing city, Yunnan province. WANG YONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

READ

Tiny Chinese projects having huge impact

With its 'small yet smart' concept, China is providing aid to other nations

By ZHOU JIN
zhoujin@chinadaily.com.cn

Enduring difficulties such as intense heat, limited equipment and a language barrier, ophthalmologist Zhao Jianfeng and his colleagues managed to perform free cataract surgeries for 118 Sri Lankan patients in two days in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, in May.

Their work was part of the Brightness Action campaign, a Chinese medical assistance project launched in 2014 aimed at restoring eyesight for underprivileged patients in developing countries.

Zhao, from the First Affiliated Hospital of Kunming Medical University in Yunnan province, said that many Sri Lankans have eye diseases such as cataracts due to prolonged exposure to sunlight and strong ultraviolet rays, and they lack adequate medical resources for treatment.

He explained that with the right equipment, the surgeries can be performed in minutes. The success rate is high, and the effects are immediate.

"The most rewarding moment was when we removed gauze from the patients' eyes after treatment," Zhao said. "I saw smiles on their faces. They gave me a thumbs-up, shook my hand and hugged me."

Indrananda Abeyssekara, a 68-year-old cataract patient and president of the Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation, regained her eyesight after the surgery. She said that she is willing to act as an ambassador to advocate for the Brightness Action campaign in local communities.

Zhao has participated in the medical aid program six times, performing surgeries in countries such as Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.

"I was deeply touched when a lady in Myanmar thanked me for giving her a normal life again," he said. "She said she had the opportunity to get back to work and have a social life again."

Zeng Zhong, director of the hospital in Kunming and leader of the medical team, said that the surgeries not only aid cataract patients, but also enhance the diagnostic and treatment capabilities of local medical institutions.

The hospital has participated in the aid program eight times over the past eight years, he said.

A key public welfare project in Yunnan's humanitarian aid efforts, the Brightness Action campaign not only demonstrates China's willingness to help people in less-developed nations but also plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration and the exchange of medical expertise with neighboring nations, Zeng said.

It also stands as a vivid example of people-to-people diplomacy, he added.

The campaign is one of China's many small-scale livelihood assistance projects, which are also known as "small yet smart" projects.

Such projects are more targeted in their approach and are financed by small loans. They include a *juncao* (mushroom grass) cultivation assistance program; a project to bring satellite TV networks to African villages; and the Luban Workshop, a vocational training program.

The concept has been a hot topic in China's foreign aid community since President Xi Jinping said at a symposium on Belt and Road development in 2021 that such livelihood projects should be prioritized in facilitating overseas cooperation.

Luo Zhaohui, head of the China International Development Cooperation Agency, said at a news conference in October that more than 200 small yet smart projects have been implemented since 2021. It is estimated that the projects have benefited millions of people.

Luo said that the agency will aim to launch 1,000 of the projects, an idea proposed by Xi at the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in October.

Wang Yiwei, director of the Institute of International Affairs at the Renmin University of China, said that unlike more high-profile pro-



Chinese agricultural expert Wang Xuemin (left) and a local staff member inspect the growth of an independently developed rice variety at a farm in Nigeria. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Chinese doctor Zhao Jianfeng conducts cataract surgery in Sri Lanka.



A Chinese doctor talks with a patient before a cataract operation in Sri Lanka.

jects, participants in the small ones are more diverse, as they involve government agencies, overseas Chinese companies, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations.

Sun Tianshu, an associate researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, wrote in an article that the small yet smart projects focus on how to leverage limited funding to achieve better development and provide diplomatic and economic benefits to the people in participating countries.

While "small" indicates the low cost and a small scope of the projects, "smart" refers to the effects, such as improving livelihoods and enhancing the impact on society, she wrote.

Sun added that the success of such projects lies in being embraced by the people and recognized as an integral force in the development of their nations.

Addressing difficulties

With its geographic advantage, the southwestern province of Yunnan initiated the "Hand in Hand" program, a nonprofit initiative, in 2022 to provide aid through small yet smart projects to nations in South and Southeast Asia, including Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Over the past two years, 92 programs have been launched in 17 countries, benefiting more than 2.6 million people. The programs have provided medical assistance and safe drinking water, installed energy-saving streetlights, upgraded rural roads and offered vocational skills training.

In recent years, the Yunnan Construction and Investment Holding Group, which has been investing and operating in Laos for 26 years, has conducted 11 small-scale assistance projects in the country, including constructing basketball courts and providing water purification equipment for schools, installing streetlights for rural villages and donating books.

Zhang Youzuo, head of the company's overseas programs in Laos,

"The most rewarding moment was when we removed gauze from the patients' eyes after treatment. I saw smiles on their faces. They gave me a thumbs-up, shook my hand and hugged me."

Zhao Jianfeng, an ophthalmologist who performed free cataract surgeries for Sri Lankan patients

recalled his visits to remote mountain villages lacking streetlights and kindergartens with old, shabby teaching tools.

"It is difficult for villagers to go out at night, and the kindergarten can no longer meet the kids' educational needs," he said.

To address practical difficulties for the Lao people, the company installed 70 solar streetlights in two villages in Oudomxay province.

The company also donated equipment such as desks, chairs and bookshelves to kindergartens in a village in Oudomxay.

The projects provided timely solutions to daily challenges and improved the villagers' living and schooling conditions, Zhang said.

"I remember when we handed over the projects, local villagers spontaneously prepared meals for us to express their gratitude. A villager from Namodai told me that thanks to the streetlights, he no longer has to walk in the dark at night.

"Receiving such feedback makes me feel proud and honored," Zhang said, adding that 26 years of construction efforts have proved worthwhile, as local people truly appreciate the work his company has done.

Wang Yu, vice-president of the Yunnan Provincial People's Association for Friendship with Foreign

Countries, said that by taking the locals' situations into consideration, the projects under the "Hand in Hand" program have achieved quick and tangible effects, and can be replicated and promoted to meet the needs of people in other areas.

The projects have garnered widespread popularity due to their emphasis on addressing people's immediate concerns, she said.

They have also brought about a mutual trust between the people of Yunnan and neighboring countries, enhancing people-to-people exchanges, she added.

Sustainable help

At the end of 2022, the China-aided Nigeria Agricultural Demonstration Center, located in the country's capital Abuja, was put into operation, aiming to scale up the African nation's agricultural productivity and development.

The Nigerian center is the first aid project run by a Chinese enterprise after its completion, allowing Chinese investments and expertise to continue playing their roles to yield economic benefits and promote sustainable development of the country's agriculture.

Through technology transfer, the demonstration center aims to identify projects suitable for Nigeria's agricultural development, facilitating the transfer of China's agricultural production capacity advantages to Nigeria, said Wang Yun, manager of the demonstration center.

Operation of the demonstration center is also expected to promote the development of the Chinese company Green Agriculture West Africa Limited, so as to better realize sustainable development of the center, said Wang, from the company, which was established in 2006 and positioned itself as a partner for China-Africa agricultural

development and cooperation.

With 49 employees, nine from China and 40 from Nigeria, the company has been planting crops such as rice, maize, vegetables and mushrooms in demonstration fields, and a rice processing line has also been put into use.

Chinese experts from the company also offer training to local farmers at the center. In 2023, the center provided training to 75 local people on rice technology and peanut processing.

Chinese agritech expert Wang Xuemin said that he had taught Nigerians about modern agricultural technology in areas such as rice cultivation, seed breeding technology, soil and fertilizer sciences, agricultural machinery and pest control.

Wang Xuemin has been engaged in agricultural assistance in Nigeria for 20 years. "In 2003, when I set foot on African soil for the first time, I didn't anticipate that I would have such a deep connection with the continent," he said.

The backward agricultural infrastructure and technology, and lack of agricultural machinery, constrained food production in the country, Wang Xuemin said.

Dispatched as a technical expert for the China-Nigeria "South-South Cooperation" agricultural project at that time, Wang Xuemin introduced basic Chinese agricultural tools, such as threshers and huskers, to farmers in Nigeria.

Immersing himself in the local perspective, Wang Xuemin said he deeply explored the country's agricultural environment, trying to use his professional knowledge to overcome various challenges in crop cultivation, and especially in rice technology.

After many years of research and development of seeds, in 2017, Wang and his colleagues successfully

developed a high-yield rice variety, GAWALR1. Its yield is about 30 percent higher than the most popular local rice varieties.

Due to the good quality and high yield, the seeds have been widely recognized by Nigerian farmers, he said.

The variety has been promoted and cultivated for over five years, boosting rice production in Nigeria by over 2 million metric tons and benefiting at least 200,000 households, he added.

To better train local farmers, Wang wrote a nearly 70-page textbook based on his experiences over the past two decades. It is all about how to deal with practical problems, he said.

"The trainees I have instructed are scattered across various rice-producing regions in Nigeria," he said.

Wang Xuemin said he plans to work in Africa for five to 10 more years.

"I hope to fully utilize the demonstration center to continuously innovate our agricultural technologies to adapt to the evolving local production environment," he said.

He said he will also promote agricultural machinery in the continent, develop more high-quality varieties, and intensify training efforts to empower more local people with the necessary technical skills.

The goal is to resolve food security concerns at their source and to have a sustainable impact on the region, contribute to long-term food sufficiency and enhance the livelihoods of local communities, he said.

"Additionally, we also hope to use the platform of the demonstration center to support China's agricultural enterprises in going global and to promote agricultural cooperation between China and Africa, said Wang Yun, the manager of the center.

IMAGE



THE GLOWING GLASS

Above: Workers at Jinxiang Glass Studio shape glass art pieces on Jan 23. PHOTOS BY WANG JING/CHINA DAILY



Left: Workers at Jinxiang Glass Studio soften and reheat glass on Jan 23. **Right:** Workers at Xiye Workshop create dragon-shaped glass art pieces on Jan 23.

Glass art is a precious cultural heritage in Zibo's history and a vibrant calling card for the city in East China's Shandong province. "World-class glass art is found in China, and the best of China's glass art is in Boshan," referring to the exquisite, delicate, and subtle nature of Boshan's glass art in Zibo, which uses similar materials to create glass that looks like pearls and jade, with colors like flowing clouds. In 2008,

the craft of glassblowing was listed on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

The art of Boshan glass can be traced back to the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century - 771 BC) and reached its peak during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). It has been continuously produced without interruption through the Song (960-1279), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

Currently, Boshan is embracing the busy season,

receiving New Year's orders from all over the country. Visitors can walk through the weathered alleys into Yanshen Ancient Town to experience and observe the entire process of glass art production.

Through the dazzling intangible cultural heritage, they can feel the strong sense of the Spring Festival.

— CHINA DAILY



Tourists visit Yanshen Ancient Town, home to 13 abandoned ancient round kiln sites, on Jan 23.



Bi Yuqiang, a worker at Xiye Workshop, blows glass on Jan 23.



Left: Visitors take photographs of a glass bell in a glass museum in Zibo on Jan 23. **Middle:** Tourists experience the process of glass production in Yanshen Ancient Town on Jan 23. **Right:** Li Shaoyue, a master of internal painting, works in her studio on Jan 24.



TREND

By HU MEIDONG in Fuzhou
and WANG SONGSONG in Beijing

Once considered a luxury reserved for special occasions, abalone has long been cherished for its tender texture and exquisite flavor. However, due to limited supply and high prices, it remained out of reach for many. Recognizing the potential for growth in the aquaculture sector, Lianjiang county in Fujian province embarked on a journey to revolutionize abalone farming.

By investing in research and development, experts collaborated to develop new abalone strains that are disease-resistant, temperature-resilient and large in size. These improved varieties not only thrive in various environments but also yield higher-quality abalone with enhanced taste and texture. To ensure the success of this endeavor, the government also offered subsidies to the local abalone industry.

The collective efforts have borne fruit as the abalone industry has prospered across the region. In 2020, China's abalone production surpassed 200,000 tons, accounting for more than 85 percent of the world's total. According to market-research firm Zhiyan Consulting, abalone production in Fujian accounted for 79.2 percent of China's total production in 2021 and Shandong province for 16.3 percent.

With increased production and improved quality, the market saw a significant drop in prices, making abalone more accessible to a broader range of consumers. More people can now savor its unique flavors and reap the nutritional benefits more frequently, fostering economic growth and rural vitalization.

New varieties

Lianjiang's abalone story began in 1989. But the industry fell into a slump in the late 1990s after the abalone suffered from disease. In response to the challenges, You Weiwei, a professor at the College of Ocean and Earth Sciences, Xiamen University, began developing new varieties in 2003.

At that time, China had only two native abalone varieties, both of them sensitive to water temperature. Many abalones died in summer. To help abalones survive the season, farmers had to transport the abalone from the southern region to the north in April and take them back south at the end of November using live water vessels and vehicles. By doing so, the survival rates and quality of the abalone were improved. However, the 1,800-kilometer trip increased costs and there was the risk of the abalones dying from hypoxia.

You decided to change that. After six to seven years of research, a new variety of abalone, Dongyou No. 1, was developed that had an increased disease resistance of 30 percent. Another new variety — Xipan abalone — had increased resistance to high temperature by 2.2 C, making abalone migration unnecessary and abalone farmers more confident about the industry.

You was not content to rest on his laurels. He wanted to increase the size of abalone. China's two native varieties were small, up to 100 grams at most. In response, You constructed a technical system of distant hybridization and bred a new variety — Lypan abalone, which increased the weight of a single abalone to 200 grams after two years of breeding and 500 grams after four years.

In 2020, he won the first prize for science and technology progress of Fujian province, the only first prize for fisheries in Fujian in the past 10 years.

"After obtaining the national new variety certificate in 2018, our seedlings have covered the main abalone farming areas in China, and have been well recognized by farmers. We have produced dried abalone products that can be compared with the international market, and no longer need to import from abroad," said You.

As the abalone have grown larger, You successfully produced China's first batch of abalone pearls in March 2023.

"The color is very special. It's blue-green, even with a little purple. We hope to provide a new product for China's seawater pearl industry," He added.

You said next he wants to cultivate more new delicious abalone varieties to meet people's demand.

Increased consumption

The development of abalone breeding technologies means more people can afford the seafood.

According to a report by the Huajiang Industrial Research Institute, abalone consumption in China



Fisherman showcases abalones in Lianjiang county, Fujian province. PHOTO BY ZHENG CHENGLE/PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

A sea change for abalone

Lianjiang county in Fujian province has revolutionized farming of the mollusk to create a thriving industry and affordable delicacy



Workers load abalones onto a ship bound for Fujian for the winter in an aquaculture area in Lidao township, Rongcheng city, Shandong province, on November 15, 2023. PHOTO BY LI XINJUN / PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

increased from less than 150,000 tons in 2016 to 229,400 tons in 2022. In terms of consumption structure, fresh-eating accounts for 71.2 percent and deep processing 28.8 percent. It estimated that driven by deep processing, there is still room for abalone consumption growth in China.

In Fujian, Zheng Libin, who runs a seafood restaurant in Taijiang district, Fuzhou city, said abalone sales in 2023 were better than 2022.

"The main channel of abalone is Fujian's Lianjiang and Dongshan counties. Shandong province also produces abalone. But after December, its price will go up because of production drawdown. In 2022, the price of abalone was more than 120 yuan (\$16.74) per kilogram and last year, it dropped to about 100 yuan. Because of that, more people ate abalone."

A man in Fuzhou, who only gave his surname Chen, said he likes to add abalones into the soup he cooks on weekends.

"The price has dropped in recent years. We buy vegetables through Pupu and Yonghui, two online instant delivery shopping platforms. Six abalones, ranging from 190 to 215 grams in total, cost only 22.98 yuan. In the past, we only ate abalone at festivals but now it's an everyday food. My family loves them," he added.

In Jinan, Shandong province, an over-50-year-old woman surnamed Wang said her family enjoys eating abalones, and she often buys them.

"It's a must-have dish during Spring Festival. In the high-end market in Jinan, abalone costs 120 to 140 yuan per kilogram, with four



Abalone seedlings in Lianjiang county, Fujian province, in January 2022. PHOTO BY ZHENG CHENGLE/PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A palm-size abalone. PHOTO BY ZHENG CHENGLE/PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“The color is very special. It's blue-green, even with a little purple. We hope to provide a new product for China's seawater pearl industry.”

You Weiwei, a professor at the College of Ocean and Earth Sciences, Xiamen University

abalones per kilogram. There are also normal-sized ones that cost 3 to 10 yuan each, depending on their size," she added.

A man surnamed Jia works in Beijing as a photographer. He is a big fan of the delicious mollusks. "When I have dinner with my friends, abalone is one of our favorite choices. If I buy it from the digital retail platforms such as Missfresh or Freshippo, they will be 16.9 yuan and 9.9 yuan each respectively, much cheaper than at the vegetable market," he added.

Industry support

The abalone industry is booming thanks to the improved abalone breeding and increased consumption demand. After more than 30 years, the industry in Lianjiang has developed from traditional abalone farming to the formation of a complete industry chain that integrates seedling, farming, processing, sales, and tourism. The industry has shift-

ed from independent operations to joint development, achieving the transformation of the abalone industry from product operation to brand economy. Since 2010, Lianjiang has become the largest abalone farming county in China.

In 2023, the county had 12 abalone processing production lines in total, with an annual processing capacity of over 8,200 tons, generating an output value of about 900 million yuan. The processed products include dried abalone, frozen abalone, canned abalone, pre-made abalone dishes, and leisure ready-to-eat products.

Fujian Fengyun Abalone Co Ltd, the only company in China that boasts whole abalone industrial chains, began its business in 1998.

At the seedling and breeding end of the industry chain, it has built three abalone breeding bases, with an annual output of 60 million abalone fry. The breeding bases in Lianjiang, and Shandong's Rongcheng produce 1000 tons.

In the processing part of the industry chain, it has built China's first automatic abalone processing production line and China's first abalone prefabricated dish research and innovation center. Its annual frozen abalone production capacity and deep processing capacity are worth more than 1 billion yuan, and 500 million yuan respectively.

To sell its product, it set up live abalone distribution centers in Lianjiang and Rongcheng to deliver live abalone to all parts of the country. At present, it has covered more than 50 first-tier and second-tier cities, forming a nationwide sales network.

To help local farmers with abalone breeding, the company, in collaboration with the local government and bank, released a project to help local abalone farmers in 2021. Led by the Lianjiang government, universities provided technological support for seedlings and farming techniques. The bank provided funding, while the company acted as a guarantor for the cooperative farmers to secure loans from the bank and also provided sales channels for their abalone.

"As of 2021, this model has provided 35.6 million yuan of specialized financing for 46 abalone farmers, effectively addressing the financing difficulties faced by the abalone farmers, stabilizing sales channels and connecting the abalone farming supply, production, and sales chains," said Xiao Liangdong, president of Fujian Fengyun Abalone Co Ltd.

Besides, it established a livestreaming base in 2022 to help local farmers with abalone sales by using new sales channels, such as short videos and livestreaming.

Local governments also attach great importance to the abalone industry. In 2020, Lianjiang introduced several policies to help the industry's development. It provides subsidies to companies providing storage facilities in refrigeration houses or opening wholesale abalone stores, expands sales channels by working with Yonghui, New Huadu, Walmart and other large supermarket enterprises, and uses QR code to monitor food quality.

Offshore aquaculture platforms also play an important role in promoting sustainable development. On October 26, 2018, China's first mechanized breeding platform for abalone, Zhenbao No. 1, was put into use in Dongluo Island in Lianjiang, marking a milestone in modernization of the domestic abalone farming industry, Fuzhou Daily reported.

The breeding platform can accommodate nearly 5,000 abalone breeding boxes, with an expected annual yield of about 12 tons. It achieved full mechanization of bait delivery, release, and net lifting and lowering. At the same time, the Zhenbao No. 1 expands the scope of abalone farming from the nearshore area 200 meters offshore to the outer sea area 3 kilometers away, where the average water depth is 30 meters, and the seawater is clear and has high oxygen content, which will significantly improve the quality and growth rate of abalone. In addition, the equipment takes full advantage of the abundant natural resources at sea, incorporating a wind power generation system to provide green energy for abalone farming, making it energy-efficient and environmentally friendly.

Financial and technical support to Lianjiang has helped its abalone industry reach a new high. "In 2023, the annual output value of the abalone industry in Lianjiang is expected to reach 5.656 billion yuan," said Hu Jian, director of the Lianjiang bureau of oceans and fisheries.

Zhao Ruixue contributed to this story.

BIZ LIFE

Exclusive e-shopping steers car owner carts

Online malls operated by auto manufacturers burnish brands, win consumers

By WANG ZHUOQIONG and LI FUSHENG

For Guo Shiqiang, 38, manager of a food processing company in Beijing's Tongzhou district, traditional e-commerce platforms like JD or Taobao are no longer the primary go-to destinations for online shopping.

Instead, he prefers Nio Life, the online shopping platform of Chinese electric vehicle startup Nio. Ever since he bought a Nio ES6 in 2021, Nio Life has become part of his life. He buys every conceivable product that a modern man needs: socks, jackets, wines, bags, what have you.

Last year, Guo spent nearly 3,000 yuan (\$417) on such products on Nio Life. Some of the purchases were made via redemption of Nio Life's award points earned for posts, test drive recommendations and so on. Mugs, cups, biscuits, nuts, kitchen accessories, backpacks ... all were scooped up from Nio Life.

"One reason is that some items are available only here, which gives you a sense of rarity. For other items, you just need them anyway. If you can place an order on Nio Life or some other certain platforms, why bother buying elsewhere?"

One example of a product with a rare or distinct touch is the backpack, a collaborative effort between Nio and Chalayan, an alternative fashion brand established in 1994.

The fact that Nio's founder William Li owns the same backpack holds a special significance for Guo. He views wearing the same backpack as Li as a profound endorsement of the brand as a car owner, expressing his strong connection to Nio.

"You don't have the same bags as the ones used by Mercedes or BMW bosses even if you drive those cars, do you?"

Guo said Nio Life's strengths lie in its diverse categories and high-quality products. Now he is interested in buying a camping tent in the store.

"From time to time, I browse through Nio's e-shop, particularly enjoying products with creative designs," he said.

Guo's experience mirrors that of a rising number of Chinese car owners, mostly male consumers of domestic EVs.

For them, buying a car has also proved to be a gateway to a new community that offers consumer products and other online interactive features.

Zhang Chutian, who is in charge of Nio Life, said consumer feedback plays a pivotal role in influencing the design and development of products sold on the online platform.



Visitors check out a Nio electric vehicle during an auto expo in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, in November.



Left: Nio's in-vehicle smart assistant is seen during an auto expo in Beijing in September 2020.



Right: Nio car owners participate in an event in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, in October. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

He said the online platform has distinguished producers of new energy vehicles from traditional automobile enterprises.

Nio Life positions itself as a lifestyle brand collaborating with more than 600 global designers, Zhang said.

"The purpose of the platform is to establish a community rooted in automobiles, share joys and growth," said Zhang. "The creation of Nio Life serves the purpose of building an interactive and long-term bridge between the brand and car users."

Over the six years since its inception, the platform has sold over 15 million items, introducing 800-1,000 products annually.

Nio Life features its sustainable fashion brand Blue Sky Lab, which prioritizes recycled fabrics and accessories.

The shopping platform has also developed its unique products. For this Chinese New Year, the platform has unveiled its dragon-themed collection, including collaborations with Chinese artist Lin Zinan.

"The core of Nio Life's business model is to create more value-added products for our car users," said Zhang.

Nio is not the only brand to do so. The rapid development of the Chinese NEV market has upgraded the way car users interact with vehicle producers.

The delivery of a vehicle is only the beginning of a long relationship with the users, creating more possible consumption scenarios.

For example, sales representatives often showcase to visitors to their store the company's official mobile app, which has strong social functions.

The accumulative points are part of a reward system of the app, often redeemed to buy consumer products or pay service fees for changing batteries or maintenance fees.

Lu Nan, 35, an office worker in Beijing, is all praise for this system. He bought a Li Auto six-seat family SUV last year. He earned 45,000 points that could be converted into

purchases on the vehicle producer's official online shopping mall, which is integrated into the mobile app of Li Auto.

The points translated into a value of 4,500 yuan. Being a father of an 8-year-old daughter, Lu used the points to buy an outdoor cooking kit, a membership for video streaming platform iQiyi, a thermos bottle, an outdoor go-cart and an inflatable mattress.

"The car, with its comfortable seats and three screens for video entertainment, is like a moving home for us now," said Lu. "It is an upgraded experience from my old Toyota."

The iQiyi membership cards, available at the Li Auto shopping

mall, sold out quickly given their popularity among car owners.

"To be able to watch movies and TV series in the car while waiting to pick up our child from school is pure pleasure," Lu said.

The model not only provided a smart in-car experience but also enabled the Lu family to ride to city suburbs for camping with friends.

Lu said outdoor gear and equipment purchased with points enhanced their outdoor activities, extending "the joy of exploring mountains and spending time with friends."

"Browsing Li Auto's online shopping mall has become a hobby for me," said Lu, who appreciates finding interesting products recommended by the vehicle producer.

According to user insight data from Li Auto, the primary buyers of its cars consist of men aged 35-44, many of whom are married with one or two children.

For its L7 model, 80 percent of the buyers are adult males aged up to 50.

Li Auto, a prominent Chinese NEV brand, has seen total deliveries in 2023 increase by 182 percent to 376,030 units, with cumulative deliveries surpassing 600,000 vehicles by the end of 2023.

It has operated 467 retail stores in 140 cities. Given the wide range of its user base, sales of consumer products on its official e-store are thriving.

In 2021, the e-store launched over 500 in-car wireless microphones priced at 365 yuan. They sold out within 25 minutes. Another batch of 1,800 units a few days later also quickly sold out within one hour.

A creative product with a cultural touch not only generates buzz for the brand but serves as a medium for emotional communication between the brand and consumers.

As Chinese NEV startups tasted branding success through creative consumer products with a cultural touch, traditional vehicle producers ranging from Geely to Volkswagen jumped on the niche e-commerce bandwagon.

Dongfeng Nissan has invested in the consumer product development category in recent years to foster its brand and reputation while enhancing interactions with car owners.

In 2020, the Sino-Japanese joint venture, which serves more than 16 million consumers, introduced its own consumer brand "Good Things", under which products like classic badges, 26 classic models and a new brand logo are retailed.

And then, in the following two years, Dongfeng Nissan continued to launch various consumer products, from the collaborative mah-jong set, the "Father's Love Like a Mountain" wine set, to the "Cloud Map" electric boarding luggage.

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Sugar-free teas sparkle in soft drinks market

By WANG ZHUOQIONG

Gong Ao, 28, a fitness instructor in Beijing, believes in setting a personal example for his clients with his well-maintained physique. To keep in shape, he relies on a sugar-free tea beverage called Oriental Leaf from the stable of Nongfu Spring, a well-known brand in China's beverage market.

Gong also provides dietary advice at a gym in the capital city. Sugar-free teas figure prominently among his recommendations for staying well-hydrated like him.

"It's part of my job to be in good shape," said Gong. "But drinking water all day could be dull. Unsweetened tea beverage is my preferred choice."

Most of Gong's fitness clients are male office workers and college students who, he said, have embraced healthier beverages.

Zhu Danpeng, a food and drink analyst in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, said Oriental Leaf has grown rapidly in recent years. "More than three out of 10 consumers of Oriental Leaf are males," Zhu said.

Cyanhill Capital noted that in China, around 268 million male consumers are aged above 35, who value price and practicality.

Launched in 2011, Nongfu's sugar-free tea initially found the going tough but has since evolved into a favored beverage option, especially among health-conscious consumers.

Healthier beverages were made popular in China initially by Genki Forest's sugar substitute formula. Later, "sugar-free" drinks captured consumers' attention.

Nongfu Spring's financial report for the first half of 2023 revealed a significant surge in the popularity of its teas. The tea beverage category generated 5.29 billion yuan (\$720,000) in revenue, up 60 percent year-on-year, constituting 26 percent of the total revenue.

Encouraged by such market success, Nongfu Spring has been investing in product innovation. For instance, the limited-edition "Longjing Spring Tea" was rolled out in March 2023, featuring premium Longjing tea. In May last year, the introduction of "Black Oolong Tea"

expanded the "Oriental Leaf" product range to offer diverse choices to consumers.

The development of the Chinese tea beverage segment has created a robust market for sugar-free tea beverages.

According to Euromonitor International, the tea beverage market in China is expected to grow from 113.1 billion yuan in 2022 to 130.6 billion yuan in 2025.

As for sugar-free tea drinks, the market increased from 5.9 billion yuan in 2018 to 7.3 billion yuan in 2021. Projections suggest further growth from 7.9 billion yuan in 2022 to 11 billion yuan in 2025, surpassing the overall tea beverage category's growth rate.

According to Frost & Sullivan's forecast, the size of China's soft drink market will reach 1.3 trillion yuan by the end of this year, with carbonated drinks and tea drinks accounting for 8 percent and 7 percent of the total, respectively, but staying equal in terms of volume.

According to data from Mashan-gy, in the first half of 2023, tea

beverages (that is, non-on-premise tea drinks) accounted for 12 percent of all nonalcoholic beverages, with a growth rate of 26 percent in terms of market share. Both market size and growth rate increased in the third quarter.

All this has persuaded beverage producers to join the trend and ride the development of the sugar-free tea segment.

Xi Guohua, head of beverage sales at Suntory China, a beverage producer, said oolong tea, constituting 80 percent of the company's sales, saw a 200 percent growth in the first half of 2023. "We've been on a high-speed growth trajectory in the past three years," he said.

Among the multinationals, Coca-Cola is focusing its attention on the tea category, enhancing its unsweetened tea product Authentic Tea House with cold-brewing technology.

Hong Kong-based Jebsen Group entered the wellness beverage market in China last year with the introduction of Remedy Kombucha, a sugar-free tea-based beverage.



A file image of Oriental Leaf, a sugar-free tea beverage of Nongfu Spring, a Chinese beverage company. Sugar-free products such as Oriental Leaf have been gaining popularity in China in recent years. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The 2022 China Sugar Free Tea Industry Insight Report by Dataway, an industry data provider, showed the sugar-free tea segment has entered a growth period and a new phase of rapid and stable development. It is expected that by 2025, the sugar-free tea market in China will exceed 10 billion yuan.

The sugar-free plant-based tea

drink market is expected to grow by 34 percent next year, making it the category with the highest growth expectation among sugar-free tea drinks.

By 2028, the market share of sugar-free plant-based tea beverages will reach 22 percent. Such beverages will be accounting for over 40 percent of the sugar-free tea beverage market share.

TRAVEL

By JULIAN SHEA in London
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Although it contains some hidden jewels to attract curious tourists, by and large, London's financial district, the City of London, is not high on most visitors' list of things to see and do.

For historical reasons, the west of the capital, which is home to its theaters and landmarks such as Big Ben, the London Eye and Buckingham Palace, is more about pleasure, whereas life farther east is largely about business.

However, it is these very businesses that are the key to some of London's newest attractions, which are growing in number because the public viewing galleries at the top of some of the City's tallest buildings command some of the best views the capital has to offer and, crucially in such a pricey place, they are free of charge.

The encouragement of viewing galleries by the City of London Corporation, which runs the financial district as a politically separate entity from the rest of Greater London, is often a condition of planning permission.

The Shard, which rises to a height of 310 meters on the south bank of the Thames and outside the City's boundaries, is Britain's tallest building, and as a result, enjoying its view of London from a 243-meter-high position, comes at a cost.

But this bird's eye view is now rivaled by those provided by the ever-expanding forest of glass and steel on the other side of the river, where the views are free.

Across from the Shard is the 160-meter-high Sky Garden, also known as the "Walkie Talkie" for its distinctive wider-at-the-top design, which houses a large indoor garden.

Open since 2015, it is probably London's best-known viewing gallery, as evinced by how quickly tickets are snapped up. Although free, for security reasons, many of the viewing galleries require advance booking.

While the viewing gallery at 120 Fenchurch Street stands slightly apart from the other spires piercing the skyline, and at a mere 69 meters high is also much lower, it has the advantage of being an open-air garden.

Vying with each other for attention on Bishopsgate are the 50th floor Lookout, which stands at an elevation of 200 meters, and its taller neighbor, Horizon 22, which stands at 254 meters.

Between them, and dependent on the weather — although cloudy skies can be even more spectacular than sunny — both platforms offer views taking in everything from the Olympic Park in eastern London, to Wembley in the north, with the dome of St. Paul's in the foreground and the Thames behind it snaking westward to Westminster and beyond.

For the organized visitor, London's many other high points, including the Post Building, One New Change and the Tate Modern, offer wonderful free vistas that are worth the effort required to gain admission, if only to see familiar sites from unfamiliar angles.

Ian Mansfield, editor of the London exploration and information website Ian Visits, told China Daily that viewing platforms are nothing new in the city.

"The (62-meter-high) Monument, commemorating the Great Fire of London, opened in 1677 and was the



Towers in the City of London provide stunning views looking out across the river to south London. PHOTOS BY JULIAN SHEA / CHINA DAILY

London's free views come at a cost

Soaring towers ignite new tourism interest amid concerns over city's changing skyline



The panorama shows the River Thames snaking westward to Westminster and the Houses of Parliament.

original London viewing platform, but after that not much happened until the BT Tower's rotating restaurant opened in 1965, but that shut in 1980 over security fears," he said.

"I think the creation of the London Eye for the Millennium triggered people's expectations that

they should have some sort of public access to views."

Both the Greater London Authority, which runs the wider London region, and the City of London Corporation have encouraged developers to include public provisions, but Mansfield said that



The skyline around the once-prominent Tower of London has become increasingly crowded in recent years.



A view of an always-busy bar at the top of the Sky Garden, also known as the Walkie Talkie.

it was "just a bit of coincidence that we've had so many so tall buildings go up in such a short time that we now have a cluster."

The new platforms offer visitors views that could only otherwise be seen from a low-flying aircraft, and Mansfield said that opening them

has been part of a deliberate policy to give the City a life beyond working hours.

"A City official once said to me that they didn't want it to be like Manhattan, which is dead out of (office) hours, and I think it worked — the City certainly feels busier," he said.

“

If one looks around today at what London has become in 2023, it is clear that we are no longer talking about winners and losers. We are all losers.”

Barbara Weiss, an architect who was one of the founders of the Skyline campaign

But while busier streets may be welcome, there is concern over the increasingly busy skyline.

In 2014, architect Barbara Weiss was one of the founders of the Skyline campaign, which aims to protect London from domination by excessively tall, overbearing buildings.

"I was dismayed by the realization that too many beautiful historical buildings were being demolished in the name of regeneration, only to be replaced by ones consistently inferior in terms of design, materials and craftsmanship," she told Architects Journal.

"As I watched with great consternation, a gray army of lift cores started morphing into enormous incarnations, drastically and permanently altering the city's skyline."

Although the group has succeeded in scuppering plans for buildings such as the 72-story Paddington Pole in western London, Weiss told the online website last year that it is "devastating to observe that we, the objectors, were actually spot-on in estimating the seriousness of the risk presented to London by the brazen and unconscionable experiments conducted on its skyline."

"If one looks around today at what London has become in 2023, it is clear that we are no longer talking about winners and losers. We are all losers," she said.

One of the ironies of the divisive topic of skyscrapers is that while their viewing galleries offer visitors such breathtaking vistas of London, these views are so good precisely because being in a tall building means that you cannot see its sometimes questionable impact on the skyline.

Absurd situation

Or at least that should be the case, but London is now in the rather absurd situation of having so many towers clustered together that they start to get in each other's way, obscuring the very panoramas on offer.

"I don't think skyscrapers spoil the view, they create a new view and they're clustered together so they don't ruin it," said Mansfield. "But we are now in a situation where, by accident or design, they're starting to be on top of one another. We have a surplus."

"If someone can't get tickets for Horizon 22, I recommend the Lookout, which is literally next door and has 50 floors, as opposed to Horizon's 58. It's much easier to get into and the view is 95 percent the same."

"Currently there are plans for another skyscraper called One Undershaft, which is scheduled to be 74 stories high, and even taller than the Shard — and that will be one street away from Horizon 22 and the Lookout. It shows the ludicrousness of the situation."

Travel firms hope to reclaim lucrative Chinese market share

By JULIAN SHEA in London

When it comes to the Spring Festival travel rush, preparation is everything — and this year, travel companies in the United Kingdom hope to continue to reclaim their lucrative pre-pandemic market share of Chinese tourists.

As the managing director of Guanxi, a representation company that helps British tourism brands sell their offerings in China, Helena Beard knows the market well.

She told China Daily there are two Chinese demographics — tourists, and UK-based students — distinctly different, but united by a love of quality experiences.

"Before COVID in 2019, there were 882,000 Chinese visitors to the UK, making them the 10th-biggest market in terms of numbers; and in terms of spend, they were the second-biggest," she said. "We know they stay longer than other nationalities, and are more likely than others to travel around the country, particularly to Scotland."

The UK's Chinese student market comprises about 150,000 people, who are often internationally aware, with language skills and a desire to explore.

They see being based in the UK as a hub from which to explore Europe and to take the opportunity to go to places they have always wanted to visit, because once their studies are over, they will start work, and so this is their chance to have life experiences, Beard said.

Having worked so closely with the Chinese market, she knows what to do and what to avoid, to keep customers satisfied.

"It's hugely important to be welcoming and respect cultural differences," she said. "Embarrassing someone in public, even if it's just about something like keeping off the grass, is an absolute no-no. Anything that draws attention to people is devastating, so clear instructive signage is important."

Beard lives in the coastal city of Brighton, and her commute to London through the countryside

has highlighted one thing she said Chinese visitors love.

"It makes me smile how they get so excited about animals in fields," she said. "They don't understand why we don't go in and pet them, because they find them so cute, but if you live in a tower block in central Beijing, I suppose you're not used to seeing fields of sheep."

As Spring Festival was approaching, Beard said she felt optimistic that the Chinese tourist resurgence would continue this year and beyond.

"Everything I'm hearing is that this year will be good, and numbers will get back to pre-COVID (levels)," she said. "The big issue at the moment, though, is the loss of the ability to reclaim VAT (value added tax). This means a high-spending group (will probably) spend its money in Paris or Milan instead of London, which means less money in the tills, and shorter stays, so it's lost hotel revenue as well."

The pandemic, Beard said, has made people value their time and money more.

"What we missed were the things we enjoy, so now people are more likely to think 'let's spend more time in that hotel, not rush around so much; let's make the visit worthwhile,'" she said.

"The trend definitely seems to be fewer places, for longer, more quality time. It's a more mature market. I think it makes for a good future."

Big hit in southern Europe

Shifting the focus to southern Europe, Montenegro is another country that is vested in continuing to attract Chinese visitors. In December 2021, the Chinese tourism magazine Traveling Scope named the country as the best foreign destination with natural landscapes.

Located in the Balkans, Montenegro is only 13,812 square kilometers in size, with a population of just over 600,000, but it is a big hit with Chinese visitors.

In the first nine months of 2019, the number of Chinese tourists to Montenegro more than doubled, according to figures from the Euro-

pean Travel Commission, and as travel normality returns, the country is eager to build on that legacy.

"We have opened an office in Beijing because we see a big increase in Chinese interest in the Balkan region in general," Emil Kukalj, innovation director at the Montenegro Tourist Service, told China Daily. "We've been at all the major travel fairs in China, and have a lot of presence on Chinese social media, because our country has so much to offer."

Over the years, Montenegro has seen many cultures pass through, including the Venetians and Ottomans, all of whom have left their cultural imprint on a country known for its mountains, clean air and health resorts, with almost 10 percent of its land being national parks.

Described by Conde Nast Traveller magazine last year as "the underrated European gem that should be on everyone's radar", Montenegro offers visitors scenery, health tourism, nature, skiing and shopping, and is consciously looking to attract more visitors from China, which has just helped build its first major highway.

Last year, London's Time Out magazine ranked the Montenegrin resort of Kotor as the world's most beautiful

place. For centuries, it has been known for the health-giving properties of its clean air, which is a mix of mountain and sea breezes, and it is a United Nations-protected natural and cultural-historical region.

Lidija Bozovic, director of sales at the Hyatt Regency Kotor Bay Resort, told China Daily that a lot of out-of-season business seemed to be driven by younger Chinese tourists, budget airline flights from elsewhere in Europe, and social media.

"Toward the end of last year, we noticed that we were getting a lot of custom from China, and we wondered why, so we investigated and found out that it was down to people finding out via a social media group, where someone had shared details about their trip," she said.

Identifying these viral vacationers and TikTok tourists as a rich source of Chinese interest has enabled tourism bodies in Montenegro to specifically target the demographic, with tailored videos, social media offerings and specially designed programs.

"We focus on telling them what (Montenegro) offers. We have mountains, we have amazing scenery, and it's a very safe place for single travelers," Bozovic said.

SPORTS

BULL RIDING

Saddling up for a shot at the big time

Teenager on a mission to become first woman on bull riding's elite tour



Najiah Knight works out in the garage of her family's home in Arlington, Oregon. AP

Najiah Knight drops her 45-kilogram frame onto a snorting bull, weighing in at more than half a ton, and adjusts her ropes, warming the sticky rosin. Music blares across the arena, but Najiah can only hear her dad, in the chute with her, and her mom, cheering from the stands. She nods to indicate she's ready, and a cowboy pulls the door of the chute.

The gate swings open, and Najiah — a 17-year-old gladiator entering a ring where men rule — begins her dance with the bull.

Najiah, a high-school junior from small-town Oregon, is on a quest to become the first woman to compete at the top level of the Professional Bull Riders tour. She cannot join until next year, when she's 18, and even then, she'll have to prove she's good enough to qualify. There's fierce competition: Only about 30 of the best riders from around the world reach the top. It takes time, travel, money and, perhaps most of all, guts. The sport is undeniably dangerous, with riders frequently injured and, sometimes, even killed.

None of that fazes Najiah. If there's one thing she doesn't have, it's fear.

"Since I was a little kid, at 3 years old, I would tell my dad that this is what I'm gonna do," she said. "I'm going to be a bull rider. I'm going to make it. As I got older, it was 'I'm going to be in the PBR, I'm going to be the first girl!'"

"That is my why. That is my drive," added Najiah, the only woman qualified in the 16-18 age division for the Junior World Finals in December in Las Vegas.

There, wearing a helmet and mouth guard, in the chute, she made adjustments to the rope circling her bull. She threw her hips forward. Then came the nod — go time. In that moment, there's no emotion, just focus.

"You've got to be in the game, you've got to follow the bull," Najiah said. "I'm just trying to stay on and grit it out."

In bull riding, athletes try to stay on the bucking animal for eight seconds while keeping one hand in the air. It's violent and chaotic. Riders cannot touch the bull with their feet

hand. If eight seconds is achieved, both bull and rider are scored, with 100 points being the highest — though rarely given — total.

Like many of the teens that day, Najiah fell in just a couple of seconds. But she'd get another chance.

'No taming that fire'

Back home, Najiah is more typical teenager than rodeo star. She lives on the outskirts of Arlington, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of 628 people along Interstate 84, which cuts across Oregon. There's a gas station, a small grocery store, a hardware store and the Big River Pizza & Grill, with the motto: "Eat, Drink and Smile."

Najiah plays volleyball and basketball for Arlington High, which fields combined teams with a nearby school because both are so tiny. You'd never know from looking at her how tough she is, her coach says. But her parents realized from the start that their girl was fearless.

At age 3, Andrew Knight said, Najiah started riding sheep — known as mutton busting. "It was like she had velcro pants on, and she'd stick to them," he said with a laugh. "There was not an inch of movement budging her off, even when she dragged them to the ground."

Her mom, Missi, saw it, too. "There was no taming that fire," she said.

Andrew is also a bull rider, and Missi wanted to be able to treat either in case of injury, so, she trained as an EMT, and it's become her career.

When Najiah was 7, she started riding steers. At 9, she was on miniature bulls — and getting attention. From 2018 to 2020, she was ranked among the country's top 15 mini bull riders. In 2020, she was the first girl to ride at Madison Square Garden, in New York. And in the third round, she beat all the boys.

The next year, Najiah broke her arm — she didn't want to believe it happened, but Missi could tell, thanks to her training. It's been one of just a few injuries, and it sidelined Najiah for the junior finals. So did the pandemic. But, for some two

years now, she has been riding junior bulls — a step below the big bulls. She finished in the top three in her region this year to earn her spot in the Junior World Finals.

At home, after volleyball practice, Najiah trains with Andrew in the driveway, on a barrel set up with springs and levers to simulate a bull ride. He rides a fine line between coach and dad. If he feels fear, he said, his daughter will, too. So his motto is one of positivity.

He jokes with Najiah before she rides to keep her loose, but once she's in the chute, he turns to encouragement.

"You've got this," he tells her.

'The perfect ride'

In Las Vegas, two days after her

first ride, Najiah got her second attempt in the Junior World Finals.

She stretched and did a little circular dance with her legs bowed. She knelt in prayer. With her dad, she readied for the ride — the duo able to communicate without speaking, as Najiah pulled the rope on her bull in line for the chutes.

She nodded, motivated as always. But again, she was tossed by the bull after a few seconds — well short of eight. She wouldn't make the final round.

She was disappointed, but not discouraged. "I wanted it to go perfectly, just the perfect ride, but it doesn't always go that way," she said. "You always have next time."

Najiah is as direct as ever about what she wants to accomplish: Be

the first woman on PBR's top-level tour, Unleash The Beast; be named Rookie of the Year; and win a world championship. Every ride, no matter what happens, is a step toward that goal.

In getting there, Najiah and her family have been strategic in promoting her, with an eye on the long game. They've cultivated her image on social media and courted key sponsorships to help pay for rodeo entry fees and travel. Events that count toward qualifying in her region have taken her to North Dakota, Idaho, California, Colorado and Wyoming in the past year.

Najiah has deals with Cooper Tires and Ariat, the boot and clothing maker, among others. She was the first mini bull rider Ariat sponsored; in the fall, she traveled to Texas for a photo shoot with the company.

A condition of her sponsorships is maintaining good grades. She has a 4.0 GPA and is a member of the National Honor Society. She hopes to attend the University of Oregon, even while trying to reach the Unleash The Beast tour.

Not much scares Najiah. At a mini bull competition in Louisiana, a bull stepped on her, cracking her helmet and sending blood streaming down her face. But, she had another ride to go, so she borrowed a helmet and got right back on.

Everyone from experienced riders to casual fans can see Najiah's passion, drive and fearlessness, but it's hard to say how feasible her dream is, according to fellow riders and league officials.

"There is the hopeful side of me that wants her to be a world champion in the next five or six years," PBR CEO Sean Gleason said. "I think I'm a fairly optimistic guy, and so I believe that anything is possible for her. She's been committed. She's been working at it for a long, long time."

"But, it's a very difficult sport. The hill to climb is high for anybody that wants to be a top-level professional bull rider — but I honestly don't believe that it's any higher for her than it is for any other person her age, regardless of gender."

'The only girl'

Najiah doesn't see her gender as an obstacle. "I'm just a bull rider," she often says with a shrug.

But she also wants to be a role model for women and for Native Americans. Najiah and her family are Paiute, part of the Klamath Tribes, and she proudly wears a beaded hat band and necklaces before she rides. In Vegas, she and Missi both wore moccasins made by an aunt. Outside the arena, Najiah is active, too — last year, she appeared at a Ride to the Polls event to encourage young Navajo voters in Kayenta, Arizona.

"I'm pretty sure I'm the only female Native American bull rider that I know," she said, even though rodeo is a popular sport in Native American communities.

Najiah looks to women like bull riding pioneer Jonnie Jonckowski as inspiration. Going forward and working off that foundation, Najiah has the potential to bring more fans and attention to bull riding — much like the sensation caused by Danica Patrick in the auto racing area.

Other girls who ride, or aspire to ride, are taking notice, too.

Blayklee Glass, 12, reached the finals in Las Vegas, placing seventh in her age group. She said that she admires the 17-year-old, and, like Najiah, she's content competing against boys.

"They're like, 'So what, you're a girl,'" said Blayklee, of Prescott, Arkansas. "I like being the only girl!"

For Najiah, the Vegas competition hasn't swayed her drive or derailed her dream. When she turns 18, she expects to compete on the Pendleton Whisky Velocity Tour. From there, she'll work to earn the points needed for the top level.

Najiah — and her family, the league and her sponsors — know it's a long road. She long ago accepted the danger of the sport and the challenge of making it to the top. She insists that she has what it takes: the passion, the nerve, the confidence, the focus.

"I don't care about what anyone else thinks," she said. "I do this for me."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA



Najiah Knight has proven herself to be fearless in bull ring, overcoming numerous injuries, including a broken arm, and once jumping right back into the saddle after a bull had crushed her helmet, sending blood streaming down her face, at a competition in Louisiana. AP



SPORTS

OLYMPICS

Girls gain yards on flag football field

Noncontact game enjoying soaring popularity as US schools and colleges embrace newly added Olympic sport

There were times when Jo Overstreet felt all alone as a standout flag football player on boys' teams growing up in Texas.

Sure, she was accepted. Considered to be "just one of the boys".

She longed for something more — a sense of sisterhood.

These days, the 40-year-old receiver for Team USA sees a thriving community of females, of all ages and abilities, lifting the sport to new heights. It's an expansion that will only be enhanced with the sport's recent addition to the Olympic program for the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

The noncontact game, featuring plenty of fast-paced action, has been on the rise for a while, with women-only teams and leagues springing up from coast to coast — from continent to continent, too. Eight states have sanctioned girls flag football as a high-school varsity sport — more are initiating pilot programs — and college scholarships are now offered for female players at the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics level. The NFL has even thrown its weight behind flag football through leagues and events.

"This is so big for women to be able to say, 'I have a dream to play football' — and to actually know that opportunity is really there," said Overstreet, a former basketball player at the University of Houston who hopes to be in the mix for a spot on the inaugural Olympic roster. "Just saying that to myself now, I'm still in shock."

Flag football is a sport many in the United States grow up playing, either through gym class in elementary school or part of a youth league, or perhaps on the playground at recess. It became even more visible last winter, when the NFL turned to flag football as part of its Pro Bowl festivities.

At the international level, the game consists of five players per side on a field that's 50 yards (46 meters) long — plus 10 yards for each end zone — and 25 yards wide (about half the traditional American football field). The offensive team has four downs to reach midfield. If they reach midfield, the team has four downs to score.

Additionally, every offensive player is an eligible receiver.

The speedy nature of the game has helped it catch on, too.

According to research by USA Football, over a stretch between 2014 and 2022, the participation rate for girls aged 6-12 increased by 178 percent. There were roughly 112,000 girls in this age range that played the sport in 2021 and 2022.

Like Makayla Martinez, a 14-year-old wide receiver from Phoenix who stood out during the USA Football/Los Angeles Rams' talent identification camp last summer. She started



Players practice with Texas Fury, an all-women flag football team on Dec 10, 2023, in Austin, Texas. The women's game is enjoying surging popularity in North America, with the sport's inclusion in the 2028 Summer Olympics adding to its appeal. AP



Ashlea Klam pulls a flag from a teammate during a training session for Keiser University's flag football team in Florida last year. AP



Sonya Chalil jumps between Kirby White (left) and Bella Franks during a Texas Fury practice session in Austin, Texas, last year. AP

playing at 5 years old after watching her cousins take the field. She switched to soccer, though, not seeing a future in flag football — until now.

"My dad was like, 'There's this girls' team that's starting. Do you want to give it a try?'" Martinez recounted. "I was like, 'No, not really.' Because I only had played on a boys' team. But I gave it a shot. I went for it. I just started focusing on flag football, because I saw that it was growing."

Currently, Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and New York offer flag

football as a varsity girls' sport at the high-school level. More states are testing it out, with New Jersey recently moving it from a club sport to one overseen by the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association for the next two spring seasons.

The powerful promotional arm of the NFL is generating growth, too. The league has set up camps, clinics, a circuit and even exhibitions.

The Klam family of Austin, Texas, used to be a baseball household, traveling all over to tournaments for their son. Now, Jason and Amberly Klam are fully invested in the world

of flag football, even starting their own female travel teams. Their 19-year-old daughter, Ashlea, has long been a star in the sport — since she first stepped onto the field for a boys' team at seven years old. A few years later, Ashlea joined an all-girls' squad and they have since traveled all over.

That led them to launch Texas Fury, an all-girls' flag football select travel team. At first, they had six girls. These days, the Fury has more than 60 players and seven different teams in various age groups.

Ashlea earned a flag football scholarship at Keiser University in

West Palm Beach, Florida, one of nearly two dozen NAIA schools that have programs. Last May, Ottawa University in Kansas cemented its dynasty by winning the program's third straight NAIA women's flag football title over Thomas University (Georgia) at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta.

"My daughter getting an opportunity to go play in college — it's one of those dreams come true," Jason Klam said. "And with the sport being added to the Olympics, the future is just tremendous."

Ashlea Klam was back home in Austin in October — lobbying for

Texas high schools to include girls flag football as a varsity sport — when she awoke to a text from her parents. A simple screen shot: Flag football was officially in for the 2028 LA Games. Her sport, the one that meant so much that she passed on joining the military to compete in track and field, was gaining inclusion (along with cricket, baseball, softball, lacrosse and squash).

"I had full faith it was going to make it in," Ashlea Klam said. "We can really show everyone that flag football deserves to be there — and that flag football should be everywhere."

The US and Mexico already have a robust rivalry on the women's side. The US beat a Mexico team led by star quarterback Diana Flores during the Americas Continental Flag Football Championship — organized by the International Federation of American Football — in Charlotte, North Carolina, over the summer. At the World Games the year before, Flores led her squad to a gold medal.

It's years away, of course, but it could be quite a showdown at the LA Games.

The roster? It's still some time away, but beginning next season, there are official USA Football sanctioned events and tournaments to kick off the selection process. It's anyone's guess who makes the team, as the sport may start luring athletes from other sports (imagine the speed of track stars such as Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone and Sha'Carri Richardson).

"The announcement (of flag football being in the Olympics) was rocket fuel to an already very fast-paced growth trajectory for the passion of girls and women wanting to play football," Scott Hallenbeck, the CEO of USA Football, said of a sport that's an invitational Olympic event for now, but already working ahead to be included on the program for the 2032 Brisbane Games. "It's been an explosion of participation."

Receiver Madison Fulford discovered flag football nearly two years ago while playing in an intramural league. In no time, the Limestone University track standout was putting her speed and agility to use for the national team, where she scored four touchdowns in the gold-medal game versus Mexico last summer.

Fulford balances her time between serving as an Air Force mental health counselor in San Antonio with wearing the red, white and blue for the national team and running flag football skills camps for young women, all over the country.

"I tell them to just have fun," Fulford said. "Have a fun time bonding with your teammates, your sisters."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Addition of NFL stars could be an LA Games-changer

DENVER — Imagine Tyreek Hill catching passes again from Patrick Mahomes. Not in a Super Bowl, though, but with a gold medal on the line for Team USA.

Anything's about to become possible after flag football was elevated to Olympic status. The noncontact sport was added to the program for the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles. Miami's Hill and Kansas City's Mahomes are among the NFL players who've shown an interest in possibly wearing the red, white and blue in the Olympics.

Flag football is a sport many in the United States grew up playing, either informally the backyard or at recess in elementary school, or in more organized environments like gym class or local leagues. In this version of American football, every offensive player is eligible to catch a pass. And on defense, ending up with a flag is a good thing — it's how you stop your opponent. The NFL has jumped on board, too, adding flag football to the league's Pro Bowl activities.

• What are the rules?

The standard style of the game is five-on-five with no linemen. It's played on a field that's 50 yards (46 meters) long — along with 10 yards



Tyreek Hill (left) of the Miami Dolphins and Patrick Mahomes of the Kansas City Chiefs are among the NFL stars that have expressed an interest in playing flag football at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. USA TODAY SPORTS VIA REUTERS.COM



for each end zone — and 25 yards wide. That's about half the size of an NFL field. A stop is made by ripping off one of the flags attached to the ball carrier's waist. The offensive team has four downs to reach middle of the field. If they make it, the team has four more downs to score.

An offensive touchdown is worth six points with the subsequent extra-point attempt varying in value. A successful kick from the 5-yard line is awarded one point, while a successful attempt from the 10-yard line is awarded two points. A defensive touchdown earns two points.

Each game consists of two

20-minute halves, and the clock stops within the final two minutes of each half. If a game is tied after regulation, there is an overtime period where each team receives an offensive possession. There are no running plays when a team is 5 yards or less from the end zone.

• Equipment requirements

Very simple: Flags, a belt to hold the flags, cleats, jerseys, mouth guard and, of course, the ball. There are 12 players on a roster. The governing body for the sport is the International Federation of American Football (IFAF).

• Is it an Olympic sport?

The sport is one of five added for the LA Games, but it's only an invitational sport for the moment.

Another invitational sport, breaking, will make its Olympic debut in Paris this summer, but won't return for LA.

The flag football community is already working to have it included in the 2032 Brisbane Games "so we clearly give ourselves the best chance for longevity and ultimately becoming a true sport in the Olympic Movement," Scott Hallenbeck, the CEO of USA Football, explained.

• Is it open to NFL players?

In theory, and for now, yes. But really, it's going to boil down to what the league, owners and teams have to say. Some big-name players have already expressed a strong desire to play.

It's a different style of game, though, and the national teams feature world-class players, too. The US men have won four straight world championships, while the women have captured two in a row. But Team Mexico, led by standout quarterback Diana Flores, won the gold medal at the World Games in 2022.

• What will this mean for flag football going forward?

Eight states — Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and New York — have sanctioned girls' flag football as a high-school varsity sport. In addition, there are around two dozen National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) schools that played women's flag football in 2023 — and more plan to do so in upcoming seasons.

According to USA Football research, more than a million kids between the ages of 6 and 12 played the sport in 2022. There's also been more than 1.5 million participants between 6 and 17 who have played in each of the past two seasons.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA