

Cultural links

Teochew Opera performers keep Chinese heritage alive in Thailand
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Transparent, fairer market seen ahead
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Better connected

Tech gathering seeks cooperation in mobile communications industry
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CHINA DAILY

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Draft govt work report discussed

Accelerating momentum of economic recovery highlighted by Party's core leadership

By XU WEI
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China's policymakers pledged on Thursday to further invigorate the economy, prevent and defuse risks and improve social expectations as they deliberated on the draft of the Government Work Report before the opening of the national legislature's annual session next week.

The Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, the Party's core leadership, highlighted at a meeting the need to build up the momentum of the nation's economic recovery and make sustained efforts to push for the quality and reasonable growth of the economy.

The meeting was presided over by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee.

The draft of the report, which set out priorities for the central government's work this year, will be reviewed by national lawmakers during the second session of the 14th National People's Congress, which is due to open on Tuesday.

The report was also deliberated in February at a plenary session of the State Council, China's Cabinet.

Premier Li Qiang also presided over a meeting in January to solicit opinions from experts, business leaders and representatives from sectors such as education, scientific research, culture, health and sports on a draft of the report.

The policymakers underscored on Thursday China's accomplishments over the past year, highlighting the challenges posed by a complex international landscape and the substantial tasks of reform,

development and stability.

The nation has navigated external pressures and internal difficulties, making concerted efforts to achieve a stable transitioning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, securing economic recovery and substantial progress in high-quality development, said a statement issued after the meeting.

Official statistics showed that China's GDP expanded 5.2 percent year-on-year in 2023 to 126.06 trillion yuan (\$17.53 trillion), surpassing the government's preset annual growth target of around 5 percent.

The nation created 12.44 million new jobs last year, with its surveyed unemployment rate in urban areas standing at 5.2 percent.

With this year marking the 75th founding anniversary of the People's Republic of China and being a criti-

cal year for fulfilling the goals set out in the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25), the policymakers emphasized accelerated steps to foster a new development pattern, advance high-quality development and further deepen reform and opening-up.

They also called for steps to work toward a high level of self-reliance in science and technology, bolster macro regulation and coordinate measures in boosting domestic demand and deepening supply-side structural reform.

The government's proactive fiscal policy must be moderately intensified toward greater quality and efficiency, while the nation's prudent monetary policy should be flexible, moderate, precise and effective, the policymakers said.

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Fujian chipmaker cleared of charges by US court

By FAN FEIFEI
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Chinese semiconductor manufacturer Fujian Jinhua Integrated Circuit has been found not guilty of stealing trade secrets from memory chipmaker Micron Technology Inc of the United States, bringing an end to a five-year-long legal dispute.

Experts said this will benefit the long-term development of China's chip industry.

US District Judge Maxine Chesney told a court in San Francisco on Wednesday that the Chinese company was not guilty of economic espionage and other criminal charges, concluding that the US prosecutors failed to prove Fujian Jinhua misappropriated proprietary data from Micron.

Fujian Jinhua welcomes the court ruling, the company said in a statement on its official website, adding that it has always operated in accordance with laws and has respected intellectual property rights.

The order came after Micron announced in December 2023 that it had settled an intellectual property lawsuit with Fujian Jinhua. It added that the two companies would dismiss complaints against each other and end all lawsuits between them globally.

Xiang Ligang, director-general of the Information Consumption Alliance, a telecom industry association in Beijing, said Fujian Jinhua can carry out normal business activities since all charges against it have been cleared, and that the move will have a positive impact on the healthy development of China's memory chip sector.

"Meanwhile, Chinese chip companies should ramp up their research and development inputs and improve independent innovation capacities in core technologies to mitigate the potential risks brought on by further possible sanctions from the US government," Xiang said.

In 2017, Micron sued Fujian Jinhua and the latter's partner United Microelectronics Corp in US courts, accusing the two of stealing the company's memory chip trade secrets.

The US Department of Justice in 2018 indicted Fujian Jinhua, alleging it stole intellectual property from Micron. That same year, the US authorities added the Chinese company to an "entity list", barring it from buying components, software or technology from US firms without special approval.

Zhou Mi, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, said the ruling is of significance for the US as far as dealing with IPR disputes against China through judicial processes in the future is concerned, and may

“For any company that wants to be a global leader, China serves as an important market that cannot be ignored.”

Zhou Mi, senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation

influence US government actions toward China.

He said that against the backdrop of globalization, no country can unilaterally accuse and suppress companies of other countries arbitrarily based on its own laws and interests. "For any company that wants to be a global leader, China serves as an important market that cannot be ignored. Chinese semiconductor companies are playing a vital role in bolstering the upgrade of the global industrial chain," Zhou said.

Curbs targeting China's technology development do not benefit anyone and will eventually backfire, he added.

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, China's integrated circuits output reached 351.4 billion units, surging by 6.9 percent year-on-year.

Roger Sheng, vice-president of research at US market research company Gartner Inc, said that settlement of the IP lawsuit between Micron and Fujian Jinhua also showed that Micron is eager to expand its business in the world's largest chip market.

The US chip company said last June that it will invest about 4.3 billion yuan (\$597.8 million) in its chip packaging plant in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, over the next few years.

In November, Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao met with Sanjay Mehrotra, president and CEO of Micron, where the latter expressed the willingness to continue expanding the company's investments in China.

According to a report by TrendForce, as of the third quarter of 2023, Samsung leads the global dynamic random access memory chips market with a share of 38.9 percent, followed by SK Hynix (34.3 percent) and Micron (22.8 percent).

Global semiconductor sales totaled \$526.8 billion in 2023, a decrease of 8.2 percent year-on-year, according to the Semiconductor Industry Association.

The association said global semiconductor sales were sluggish early in 2023 but rebounded strongly during the second half of the year. It has predicted double-digit market growth for the sector in 2024.

Day of grief



People release sky lanterns on Wednesday in front of the main train station in Athens, the capital of Greece, during a 24-hour strike to mark the one-year anniversary of a deadly train crash that killed 57 people. LOUISA GOULIAMAKI / REUTERS

Israel losing support of friends, allies over Gaza

WORLD WATCH
By Farhan Mujahid Chak

alleges that Hamas terrorists were hiding there. It claims that the UN relief agency UNRWA has hired Hamas operatives. In addition, its forces are finalizing preparations for ground assaults on Rafah, an area that Israel previously described as a safe zone for 1.4 million people.

Yet make no mistake, with all the death and destruction, Israel is losing the conflict.

Consider the words of German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who during the recent Munich Security Conference said the situation in Gaza is "untenable", and that conference participants could "imagine our own children living without parents, any water, any food".

Then the leaders of Australia, Canada and New Zealand jointly stated that they were gravely concerned about Israel's planned military operation in Rafah. Echoing that, former United Kingdom defense minister Ben Wallace lambasted what he called Israel's "crude and indiscriminate" bombing and said Israel "is losing support from allies and friends across the world".

See Conflict, page 3

FERTILITY EXPERTS EXAMINE REASONS FOR FALLING BIRTHS

Health challenges, lack of knowledge lead to declining number of pregnancies

By ZHANG YUNBI
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Zhu Ru, an experienced obstetrician and artificial reproductive technology expert in Anqing, Anhui province, has witnessed firsthand China's shrinking birthrate.

"Some women fail to conceive because of inflammation in the reproductive system such as salpingitis, which is an inflammation of the fallopian tubes caused by a bacterial infection. Others suffer from ovulation disorders due to obesity or excessive weight loss," Zhu told China Daily after a busy morning of consultations with dozens of patients last month.



Zhu is a deputy director in the obstetrics and gynecology department of Anqing Municipal Hospital, a leading local medical facility in the eastern province.

He and his colleagues believe that many young couples are not simply unwilling to have a child, but instead are intimidated and frustrated by physical obstacles, pain, fear and lack of support. Financial incentives proposed by some economists and demographers are not a panacea to encourage births, they added.

See Health, page 2

Green way to travel



Passengers wait to board a BYD electric bus in Cape Town, South Africa, on Wednesday. The Chinese-made buses are part of the Golden Arrow Bus Services fleet. XABISO MKHABELA / XINHUA

INSIDE
Steps needed to reduce impacts of US manufacturing policy
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PAGE TWO



A nurse demonstrates the proper handling of newborns for parents-to-be on Aug 7 at Hua'an Maternity and Child Healthcare Hospital in Jiangsu province. ZHAO QIRUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Health: Measures mulled to boost births

From page 1

In 2021, the rate of infertility among Chinese men and women of childbearing age was 7 to 10 percent, National Health Commission statistics showed. Of those dealing with infertility, an estimated 20 percent could benefit from artificial reproductive technology treatment.

Multiple factors

Zhu has also witnessed a growing number of older women who have trouble having a second or third child because of factors such as age and a declining ability to ovulate.

"Premature ovarian failure — the early cessation of ovulation under the age of 40 — is increasingly prevalent among women of childbearing age, which can be attributed to pressure brought about by supporting their family, irregular work and rest, unhealthy diet and declining immunity," he said.

For the majority of women, menstruation ends in their 50s. However, Zhu has seen some women who stop having their period at the age of 40, or even as young as 36.

Delayed preparation for pregnancy is one of the major factors behind infertility, he said.

"This is why we recommend people do what their age permits; get married and have a child early. Don't wait until your career is a major success," he said, adding that the functioning of a woman's ovaries won't wait for her job.

Another major impediment to fertility lies with men. "The average quality of sperm is declining and there is a rising occurrence of erectile dysfunction," Zhu said.

Preventing infertility is a topic that should not exclude teenagers, he added. The obstetrician has encountered cases of female students aged 16 to 17 coming to his clinic to seek an abortion. "One of the youngest was even younger than 14 years old," he said.

The hospital strictly sticks to the policy of reporting pregnancies involving girls under the age of 18 to police in order "to step up teenager protection and supervision," Zhu added.

He urged boosting sex education for junior and senior high students so they learn how to behave sensibly and to protect themselves.

"Pregnancy at too young an age and a subsequent abortion impacts fertility in the long run. A low birthrate is not necessarily solely related to a willingness for parenting, but also the physical and medical conditions of the young parents-to-be," he added.

Zhu is also the head of his hospital's reproductive medical center, which was established in April.

The center has conducted close to 80 cycles of intrauterine insemination — a technique that boosts the chances of pregnancy by placing specially prepared sperm directly in the uterus. The success rate is above 20 percent.

Now the hospital is preparing to establish an in vitro fertilization center.

"Although we are a third-tier town in the country, there is huge demand for assisted



Parents-to-be learn the sitting position for easing labor pain on Feb 19 in Beijing. HOU YU / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Family sizes

China witnessed a quick uptick in birthrates after restrictions on having a second child were lifted in 2015. But statistics point to the cooling of the second-child boom in recent years.

Echoing the nation's shrinking birthrates, the annual new births in Anqing saw consecutive drops from 2020 to 2022, falling from 37,000 in 2020 to 28,000 in 2021, and 25,000 in 2022.

The total number of the city's registered residents in 2022 was 4.156 million, a year-on-year drop of 0.36 percent, the city's statistics office said.

Tong Chen, a physician at Anqing Municipal Hospital's obstetrics and gynecology department, said despite shrinking overall birth numbers, most married couples in smaller towns like Anqing have a strong desire to have a child. However, the desire to have a second child is weaker.

"Cities like Anqing are not like big metropolises. Some people working and living in bigger cities are more willing to live alone and have a freer lifestyle. If young people get married here, they usually try to have a child as soon as they can," she said.

Tong joined the hospital's medical staff in 2010 and has two children.

She has witnessed instances of couples having one child but disagreeing on having a second child, as was the case with one of her female colleagues.

"After giving birth to the first child, she wanted to have another one, but her husband did not support her," Tong recalled. "He said: 'I

reproductive technology," Zhu said. "Currently, our hospital is actively preparing for rolling out in vitro fertilization and embryo transfers to bring hope to those unable to bear a child."

"We are providing local women and children with full-process and full-cycle health services..."

Hu Ting, head of Wangjiang County Maternal and Child Health Hospital

have a child and I am a father already. It's enough to know what it is like to be a dad. I can't handle more children."

Jiang Xihuan, the head nurse of Tong's department, said: "Young fathers-to-be should also get more involved in learning about childbirth and parenting. Based on our experience, some pregnant women are easily distracted when attending pregnancy classes due to pregnancy discomfort and tiredness."

Jiang, 55, specializes in the use of music therapy and meditation to help relieve the pain of pregnancy and childbirth.

She is also a certified fertility instructor with the International Childbirth Education Association and last year offered free classes and workshops for pregnant women in local communities.

Some fathers-to-be undergo simulated labor pain to understand what their partner is going through, but Jiang believes this is "far from enough". "Although it can make a young father feel sympathetic, it produces

no immediate effects on easing the wife's various pains," she said.

The husband, the entire family and even society should consider ways to help pregnant women eliminate psychological pain and deal with challenges, she said.

Relieving pain

Many medical experts in Anqing pointed to the disparities between big cities, smaller towns and rural areas when it comes to childbirth-related resources and public awareness, which deserves far greater attention and input.

For many women, their concerns about childbearing are not only related to a lack of support from their spouse and family, but also to labor and potential birth defects of infants.

Dong Jinchun, an associate chief physician at Anqing Municipal Hospital's anesthesiology department, is a keen advocate of analgesics to diminish labor pain.

Only 20 to 30 percent of women who give birth vaginally in his hospital have an analgesic during labor, lagging way behind richer cities and municipalities such as Shanghai and Chongqing, Dong said. In many European and North American countries the number is above 80 percent.

He noted that analgesics relieve pain without loss of feeling or muscle movement, yet "public awareness of science in this regard is far from enough".

"In cases where the pain of vaginal delivery is severe, the young mother's family members also have to agree as long as (the mother) herself has agreed to receive an analgesic during labor," he said.

He said he had found that younger first-time mothers are more likely to receive a labor analgesic. "Most of the time, giving birth

to the first child is more painful than for the second child," he said.

Jiang, the head nurse, said China also needs to urgently improve education on childbirth, "especially in third- and fourth-tier cities, where there are a lack of childbearing and parenting classes."

"Nowadays, it is a prominent problem that some smaller cities have trouble setting up workshops for pregnant women and midwife clinics," she added.

Jiang said for a small family it is essential to be on the same page when it comes to understanding appropriate knowledge rather than "superficial details".

Free checkups

Wangjiang county, which is affiliated to Anqing, provided free pre-pregnancy health checkups to 2,764 married couples over the past year as part of a nationwide drive to address birth defects.

A total of 4,436 people also completed free premarital physical checkups, which means that 96.02 percent of the people who registered for marriage in the county last year underwent such examinations.

"We are providing local women and children with full-process and full-cycle health services to continuously enhance their happiness and security," Hu Ting, head of Wangjiang County Maternal and Child Health Hospital, said in a Chinese New Year message issued this month.

Zhang Jun, an ultrasound physician with Anqing Municipal Hospital's ultrasound imaging department, has a good awareness of how birthrates have changed in recent years.

"In the past, for example, of every 100 people who got married, about 50 of them planned to have children. But now, only about 20 or 30 people plan to have children."

He added that the number of checkups for a third child now accounts for only a small fraction of the total checkups.

In the eight counties affiliated to Anqing, the accuracy and efficiency of pregnancy checkups vary across community-level medical institutions.

In recent years, Zhang's ultrasound imaging department has sent medical staff to rural communities and townships for training and guidance and to boost the standardization of such screening at local medical institutions.

"The birthrate is already low. What we do is save a pregnant woman the trouble of traveling from the countryside to the city for a regular checkup," Zhang said.

This year, the department will continue promoting advanced screening technology in rural communities to improve the level of standardization.

"We need to go back to check where they have been. What we do is to enable more babies to be born healthy," Zhang said.

He Jiang and Zhang Bing contributed to this story.



Left: An expectant mother is briefed on maternal and child health on April 6 in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Center: Tong Chen (left), a physician at Anqing Municipal Hospital's obstetrics and gynecology department in Anhui province, provides consultation for a patient on Feb 7. ZHANG YUNBI / CHINA DAILY Right: Anqing Municipal Hospital's obstetrics and gynecology department offers childbirth education classes on May 20, National Breastfeeding Promotion Day. YU XUEMEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

TOP NEWS

Economists confident of 2024 growth

They say recovery expected to continue amid improvements in consumption, investment

By OUYANG SHIJIA, LIU ZHIHUA and ZHOULANXU

China's economy has sustained robust growth despite uncertainties and challenges on the domestic and international fronts, in stark contrast with the situations in some other major economies, according to analysts.

They dismissed speculation that China's economy would face rough weather in the coming months, saying that recovery is set to continue this year with anticipated improvement in consumption and investment, given the economy's strong resilience and vitality.

Looking ahead, they said that expanding demand and fostering new growth drivers will be among key priorities for this year's economic work. They also predicted that the country will likely set its annual GDP growth target at around 5 percent during the upcoming two sessions, the gatherings in Beijing of the nation's top legislative and political advisory bodies.

"China's economy expanded by 5.2 percent in 2023, significantly higher than that of the United States at 2.5 percent, the eurozone with 0.5 percent, and Japan at 1.9 percent," said Sheng Laiyun, deputy head of the National Bureau of Statistics.

He said in a statement released on the NBS website on Thursday that China is projected to contribute more than 30 percent of global economic growth, remaining a primary engine driving global growth.

Zhang Yuxian, director of the Department of Economic Forecasting at the State Information Center, said he believes that China's economy will make a good start this year, estimating that the economy will grow steadily in the first quarter with stimulus policy measures taking effect gradually.

Although the broader economy is still facing challenges from the lack of demand and a complicated external environment, he said, "The momentum of China's economic recovery is poised to undergo further consolidation in 2024, propelled by robust policy support, the advancement of industrial transformation and upgrading, and the continuous deepening of reforms."

Tian Xuan, associate dean of Tsinghua University's PBC School of Finance, said he forecasts that the annual GDP target, to be announced during the two sessions, and the final growth rate of the country will be around 5 percent, indicating better

economic performance this year than in 2023.

Tian highlighted the necessity of managing the relationship between the growth of new and traditional economic drivers during the process of economic structural transformation, as the tone-setting annual Central Economic Work Conference in December called for efforts to "establish the new before abolishing the old".

More efforts should be made to drive the upgrading of some traditional sectors and foster new productive forces, he said.

Ayhan Kose, the World Bank's deputy chief economist and director of the Prospects Group, said the challenge that China faces is to switch from investment- and export-driven growth to growth led by consumption and services.

"Strengthening consumer confidence in the short run and undertaking the types of reforms necessary to improve growth prospects in the long run are going to be critical," Kose said on Wednesday at a global prospects meeting held by the International Finance Forum.

The Central Economic Work Conference said efforts should be made to stimulate consumption and expand productive investment to create a virtuous cycle of mutual promotion between consumption and investment.

Ning Jizhe, vice-chairman of the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, said the conference mapped out priorities for this year's economic work, especially in terms of boosting consumption.

Ning, who is also deputy director of the Committee on Economic Affairs of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, said more efforts should be made to increase people's spending power, optimize the consumption environment and boost consumption of services.

Gary Rosen, CEO of Accor Greater China, said the French hospitality group is committed to the Chinese market, adding that China is expected to become the world's biggest tourism market by 2035.

"China plays a significant role for us as a company, and we will always be focused on growth here," he said. "As the economy grows... that opens the door for more companies around the world to have the opportunity to continue to or start to invest in and grow their business in China."

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The Guizhou Little New Year Gala takes place in Rongjiang county, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture, Guizhou province, on Feb 3. The event included various performances and activities related to the Spring Festival. Feb 3 is celebrated as Little New Year (Xiaonian) in southern China. LIU XU / XINHUA

Integration of culture, tourism proves lucrative

By YANG FEIYUE
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TWO SESSIONS

The integration of culture and tourism has been playing an increasingly important role in spurring the development of China's tourism sector since the country unveiled the Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) for National Economic and Social Development in 2021.

Related proposals, such as those for preserving and utilizing intangible cultural heritage through tourism and using high-tech to help tourists better understand history, have been raised over the past two years at the annual meetings of China's top legislative and political advisory bodies.

Through the integration of culture and tourism, Yu Wulin, a deputy to the National People's Congress, has led efforts to build a prosperous tourism industry in his village in Yunnan province.

Yu, who is from Laomudeng, a village in the Nujiang Lisu autonomous prefecture, has set up a local ethnic cultural exhibition at his rural inn, displaying traditional farming tools.

He has also helped to arrange local cultural performances which have attracted many tourists to the village.

"I'll explore the further development of intangible cultural heritage and how it can create a more prosperous tourism sector and bring my fellow villagers a better life," Yu said.

Travelers' numbers and spending have experienced vigorous growth, as shown in many recent provincial government work reports.

"High-level recovery and high-quality development have become the most prominent features of the tourism industry this year," Du Jiang, vice-minister of culture and tourism, said at the China Tourism Industry Development Annual Conference in December.

Du attributed this to the resilience, potential and vitality of the economy, continuous reform and innovation in the industry, and the deep integration of culture and tourism.

Guizhou province in southwest-

ern China has promoted the accelerated recovery of its tourism sector through multiple approaches, including the organization of the Rongjiang Village Super League, which became a national sensation.

At least 1 million people attended the soccer matches in person and more than 50 million watched online in three months, according to local authorities.

Videos and live broadcasts of the event went viral, having received more than 30 billion clicks.

Last year, the province saw its traveler numbers and total tourism revenue recover to 113 percent and 119 percent of the levels in 2019, before the pandemic hit.

In northern Shaanxi province, new cultural and tourism formats were created last year, including two national-level tourist leisure districts, two national immersive cultural and tourism demonstration projects, and three national tourism performances.

These initiatives have spurred the development of Shaanxi's cultural and tourism industries. The province received 109 million traveler visits last year, up 271.9 percent year-on-year.

During the recently concluded Spring Festival, the authorities in Beijing arranged diverse cultural activities, such as temple fairs and themed exhibitions, which received a positive market feedback.

The number of these events exceeded 2,100, which was 300 percent more than during the Spring Festival in 2019.

These played an important role in stirring up the public's travel enthusiasm during the eight-day holiday, said a senior official from the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism.

The capital city received a total of 17.5 million traveler visits during the festival, up 25.7 percent over the same holiday period in 2019, with total tourism income increasing by 27.4 percent over 2019, the bureau reported.

In particular, traditional folk arts made their presence felt at the major temple fairs across Beijing, attracting a total of 5.2 million visits.

Tang Yan drew a great deal of attention with her seven-day display of delicate Beijing Juanren at the Ditan temple fair, one of the most popular of its kind.

"Visitors lay siege to our booth, making inquiries and buying our art products," Tang said, taking great pleasure in the popularity of her beloved traditional art, a silk figurine which first appeared during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220).

Li Yingqing contributed to this story.

Cultural travel gets boost from policies and demonstration zones

Cultural events have made their presence felt in the travel market, as the Chinese government has picked up on trend of rising public needs for quality cultural and tourism experiences and launched a series of favorable policies.

During Spring Festival, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism had mobilized many regions to tap into local intangible cultural heritage and folk customs to boost tourism spending.

As a result, domestic tourism market saw 474 million trips during the holiday, up 34.3 percent year-on-year and 19 percent up over 2019.

In December, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Natural

Resources and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development announced a plan to build national demonstration zones to further boost the integration of the cultural and tourism industries.

Fifty cities, city districts and counties from around the nation have been selected as potential zones.

The three ministries called on provincial-level authorities to strengthen collaboration on the construction work of the demonstration zones, formulate and introduce supporting measures at the provincial level, enhance supervision and guidance, and regularly evaluate the construction results.

The country is also planning to pilot

up to five cultural heritage-themed national-level tourism routes as part of the country's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25), according to government authorities.

In May last year, the National Cultural Heritage Administration, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the National Development and Reform Commission jointly released a circular about the establishment of such routes, which are designed to revolve around China's immovable cultural relics, including ancient cultural sites, such as tombs and cave temples.

Other elements, ranging from historical and cultural towns and cities, agricultural and industrial heritage, to

museums and memorial halls, natural landscapes and scenic spots, are also expected to be integrated into the project, based on the subject of each route.

Guo Na, assistant researcher with the China Tourism Academy, pointed out that the government has introduced policies to promote consumption and drive the high-quality development of the tourism industry.

Plans around policy and institutional innovations have also been formulated to promote the integration of culture and tourism, and to promote the expansion and upgrading of the domestic tourism market, she observed.

Goals: Improving public's well-being stressed

From page 1

The meeting highlighted the necessity to maintain the consistency of macroeconomic policy orientations to create a stable, transparent, and predictable policy environment.

The nation must vigorously promote the construction of a modern

industrial system and accelerate the development of new productive forces, which feature high technology, high efficiency and high quality, and are aligned with the country's new development philosophy, the policymakers stressed.

More steps will be taken to boost domestic demand, deepen reform,

expand high-level opening-up, and effectively prevent and defuse risks in key sectors, they added.

The meeting reiterated the nation's commitment to work related to farmers, the agricultural sector and rural areas, saying that rural revitalization and urban-rural integration must be advanced.

The nation will continue to bol-

ster its efforts in building an ecological civilization and pushing forward green and low-carbon development, the policymakers said. They also underscored the need to continue improving the public's well-being and innovating social governance.

It is important to strengthen the government's self-improvement, combat formalism and bureaucracy, and strive to fulfill the economic and social development goals for the year, they added.

Conflict: Any disregard for international law hurts geopolitical construct

From page 1

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said foreign ministers from the 26 EU states had finally agreed on "an immediate humanitarian pause that would lead to a sustainable cease-fire", urging Israel not to attack Rafah. Finally, US

President Joe Biden chimed in, describing Israel's military response in Gaza as "over the top".

What this all indicates is that Israel's allies are pushing back.

The carnage as well as the harm to journalists and UN aid staff in Gaza have delegitimized the Israeli campaign.

Continued disregard for international law hurts the entire geopolitical construct, with hegemonic powers needing to regain some semblance of propriety to maintain their position. It is this upheaval of the status quo, instead of allegations of possible war crimes and crimes against humanity, that for-

ces Israel's allies to insist on a humanitarian cease-fire.

These challenges to the global world order represent a paradigm shift.

The allegations of genocide brought by South Africa against Israel in the Court of International Justice, and the court case over Israeli

occupation of Palestinian territories, are accelerating this transformation.

Israeli operations are putting the entire edifice of the rules-based global order, the Geneva Conventions, the UN and international human rights law at stake. This coincides with a plummeting in many countries of the perception of Israel. In addition,

global leaders are calling out the hypocrisy of the Western-led order that is seen as allowing Israel to remain above the law.

The author is a visiting research faculty member at the Al Waleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

CHINA

Performers stage the Hengshan Old-style Waist Drum Dance in a street in Yulin, Shaanxi province, on Feb 13. PHOTOS BY LI XUJIA / SHANXI DAILY



Foreign troupes take part in Shanxi festivities

TAIYUAN — Early on the morning of this year's Chinese Lantern Festival, which fell on Saturday, a folk ensemble from France stood out among the groups of performers waiting for the two-day celebration to begin on the illuminated streets of Qingxu county, Shanxi province.

"After receiving an invitation from Qingxu county, we can't wait to experience the festive atmosphere," said Cathy Bravo, a member of Birousans, the French folk performance group.

In an effort to promote cultural exchange, Qingxu invited folk groups like Birousans from France, Italy and Kazakhstan to celebrate this year's Lantern Festival in the county, alongside local performers and groups from all over China.

Birousans, established in 1921 and based in France's Pyrenees Mountains, is a group known for its distinctive songs, dances and costumes.

"The attire we're wearing today represents our traditional festival clothing. It's typically worn during significant moments," said Audrey Fourtane, another member of Birousans. "As far as I know, the Lantern Festival is also an important day for the Chinese people. We are honored to celebrate this festive occasion here with our Chinese friends."

The ensemble's dance style is lively with a strong sense of rhythm. The musicians play traditional music from the central Pyrenees on instruments such as drums, oboes and accordions to accompany the dancers, who wear long, pointed wooden shoes and folk costumes.

"Our performance today showcases what France was like in the late 19th century and early 20th century," said Laurent Mayer, the group's leader. "Being able to participate in the Lantern Festival performance here fills us with excitement, and we also feel the warmth and enthusiasm of the Chinese people."

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and France. The two countries are working together to host celebrations throughout the year and have launched the China-France Year of Culture and Tourism, promoting people-to-people cultural exchanges between the two sides.

Many members of Birousans have come to China for the first time. They have spent their visit enjoying folk performances from all over the country and savoring various northern Chinese cuisines, giving them a deeper understanding of China.

Bravo said she first visited China 20 years ago and is amazed with the "remarkable changes" the nation has undergone.

"If there are future opportunities, I eagerly look forward to spending more time in China and experiencing more of its rich culture," she said.

XINHUA

Crowds flock to folk dance shows

Performers from across China put their cultures on display at National Yangko Exhibition

By QIN FENG in Xi'an and LIANG SHUANG

For each of their shows, from the Chinese Battle Dance to the Victory Waist Drum Dance, folk artists dressed in glowing costumes using multicolored props such as fans, handkerchiefs, stilts and dragons as they performed at the National Yangko Exhibition to celebrate Chinese New Year in Yulin, Shaanxi province, from Feb 13 to 24.

The exhibition, the first of its kind in China, featured 35 performance teams with nearly 3,000 participants from nine provincial-level regions. It was organized by the city in northern Shaanxi on the Loess Plateau and supported by national and provincial-level cultural and tourism authorities.

Yangko is a collective term describing the art form of folk group singing and dancing in formation across China that was mostly influenced by farmers who would sing and dances they worked in ancient times.

With exuberant gestures, tight rhythms, and festive music and a celebratory vibe, the performances are often put on during festive occasions such as Spring Festival.

After centuries of development, various types of *yangko* thrived across the country, characterized by the adoption of local props, musical instruments and folk storytelling.

"A total of 26 national-level and five provincial-level intangible heritage items were put on display on



Clockwise from top left: Folk artists perform the Yingshang Flower Drum Lantern Dance from Anhui province in Yulin on Feb 13, during the National Yangko Exhibition. Artists from the Chaoshan region in Guangdong province perform the Yingge Dance on Feb 13. Spectators interact with "lions" of a lion dance troupe from Guangdong province on Feb 13. Artists from a local *yangko* troupe stage a show on Feb 13.

the same stage," said Zhang Shengbao, chief director of the exhibition. "In the past, we mostly enjoyed the loud, jolly vibe, but now we also value the culture represented by the dances."

The Yingge Dance was among the national-level intangible heritage items seen.

Practiced in the Chaoshan region in Guangdong province and inspired by excerpts from the classic Chinese novel *Water Margin*, the dance tells a story of how rebels managed to rescue one of their

brothers imprisoned by corrupt officials. Dancers wave a pair of short sticks and make powerful and forceful movements, earning the performance the nickname Chinese Battle Dance.

The dance also integrates local elements to enrich the storytelling. Chen Jiahui, 18, portrayed Shi Qian, a sneaky thief in the novel. He said his style of dancing integrated the worship of snakes in Chaoshan and southern Fujian regions.

"I've been learning snake dance for five or six years, and the audi-

ence's enthusiasm has moved me," he said, adding that the team put on the show with light costumes despite the cold weather to give the most authentic performance.

The troupe's dedication was also greeted by local *yangko* groups. The Hengshan Old-style Waist Drum Dance, from Yulin's Hengshan district, was also a star during the exhibition.

Also dubbed the Victory Waist Drum Dance, the routine is known for dynamic and vigorous movements, fast-paced rhythms and

diverse choreography, as dancers march forward while smoothly shifting into different formations.

"We hope that people can appreciate the masculine strength in our performances, as well as the rugged, unconstrained culture in Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi) characterized by the wilderness and rough climates," said Liu Zhenjun, head of the workers' union of Hengshan district's culture and tourism bureau, who added that the Hengshan Old-style Waist Drum Dance will participate in an international tourism promotion event in March.

Other forms of *yangko*, such as the Yingshang Flower Drum Lantern Dance from Anhui province, the Jishan Stilt Walking Monsters Dance from Shanxi province and the Manchu Flower Stick Dance from Northeast China, also made their debut in Yulin.

Locals have passionately welcomed the show.

"It was loud, crowded and cheerful every day," said Liu Wangwang, a local resident. "It was mind-blowing to enjoy the variety and greatness of traditional folk art forms at our doorstep."

The city received some 2.55 million tourists and generated about 1.28 billion yuan (\$178 million) in revenue, both more than double the visitors and revenue seen during the same period last year, official statistics showed.

"The exhibition displayed the unique charm of traditional culture, as well as the contemporary value and vitality of classic intangible heritage items," said Gao Xiaofeng, head of Yulin's culture and tourism bureau.

Contact the writers at liangshuang@chinadaily.com.cn

Li XuJia contributed to this story.

Tourism boosts incomes for Ewenkis

HOHHOT — Holding a small, round piece of cowhide in her left hand, Uran used her other hand to meticulously stitch a pinch of white wool evenly to its edge.

After a series of procedures, a piece of traditional Ewenki handicraft called "sun flower" was created, with the cowhide in the center representing the sun and the wool around it symbolizing rays of light.

Uran, a 55-year-old member of the Ewenki ethnic group, runs a traditional handicraft workshop in Ewenki Autonomous Banner in the city of Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia autonomous region.

The ice and snow that blanket the region during winter — as well as China's 14th National Winter Games — have drawn tourists to the city, and

the traditional Ewenki handicraft has become a popular souvenir, earning income for the locals.

Uran said the sun flower handicraft, a regional-level intangible cultural heritage, comes from an Ewenki folk tale, representing the Ewenki ancestors living in the forest yearning for warmth and light.

"Now, the handmade accessory is loved by many tourists at home and abroad as fashionable gifts," she said.

Figures show the city received more than 1.6 million tourists during the Lunar New Year holiday, nine times more than the same period last year, and tourism revenue skyrocketed to 1.14 billion yuan (\$160 million), 10 times higher than the 2023 period.

Aijim, Uran's daughter who helps

run the workshop, said some tourist resorts, museums and exhibition halls have placed orders with their workshop for souvenirs, with some requesting customized designs.

She said business revenue has exceeded 50,000 yuan since the Lunar New Year.

The workshop employs 26 full-time workers and 30 part-time workers. Part-time workers earn more than 2,000 yuan a month on average, and can make as much as 5,000 yuan, depending on the quantity and quality of their work.

Since its establishment nine years ago, the workshop has helped 12 workers shake off poverty while also offering free handicraft skills training to more than 1,000 locals.

"My mother and I believe it's equally important to develop our



From left: Uran makes the traditional Ewenki handicraft "sun flower" in her studio in Hulunbuir, Inner Mongolia autonomous region on Feb 21. A souvenir shop in Hulunbuir features Ewenki handicrafts.

PHOTOS BY YU JIA / XINHUA

workshop and bring fortune to our neighborhood," Aijim said.

Their workshop is located in an ethnic cultural startup park built in 2016 in the banner to encourage entrepreneurship and develop Chinese traditional culture. To date, the park has attracted nearly 300 busi-

nesses. To woo young customers, Aijim has developed new products, including refrigerator magnets and mouse pads, and has advertised them online.

Last year alone, the workshop sold some 60,000 handicraft items, raking in a record high revenue of

more than 800,000 yuan. The range of customers has expanded to Guangdong province, Fujian province and other places. "I hope our sun flower accessories can be sold to more places," Aijim said.

XINHUA

Editor's Note: As protection of the planet's flora, fauna and resources becomes increasingly important, China Daily is publishing a series of stories to illustrate the country's commitment to safeguarding the natural world.

By CHEN LIANG
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A curved artificial embankment partly separates the mouth of the Linhong River from the vast expanse of the Yellow Sea in the coastal city of Lianyungang in Jiangsu province. Within the embankment lies patches of mudflats, a pond of shallow water and a dry shoreline marred by mounds of sand and rocks and overgrown with weeds.

The partly enclosed area, with a footprint equivalent to some 20 Palace Museums in Beijing, was once an intertidal mudflat. In the spring and autumn, it is a vital stopover site for thousands of water birds, particularly waders, as they pause to rest and forage during their migrations.

The site has become the focal point in an ongoing dispute between an environmental group and a developer that has persisted for nearly three years and shows little sign of resolution.

Judicial ruling

The site was approved as the construction area for the Jiangsu Lianyungang Blue Bay Remediation Project, with a budget exceeding 1.8 billion yuan (\$250 million). The original plan was to create a waterfront recreation area for residents and tourists, forming a "seaside landscape of blue sea, blue sky and white sand", according to the developer.

However, construction at the site was recently halted by a court order after the Friends of Nature Environment Institute, a Beijing-based grassroots environmental nongovernmental organization, brought the project to court, contending that it was damaging the foraging grounds of migratory birds.

On Jan 4, the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court in Jiangsu ruled that the project poses a real risk of ecological damage and should cease construction until gaining further legal approval. Both the institute in charge of environmental assessment before the approval of the project and the construction company were held jointly responsible.

However, the court also stated that the current evidence does not conclusively prove the project's ecological damage or the risk of ecological destruction from the completed parts of the project.

The ruling marks a pivotal moment in the environmental public interest litigation that has rumbled on for three years so far. Some environmental law scholars said the ruling was a significant advancement in environmental justice, serving as a warning to all environmental assessment institutes, while a few conservationists consider the ruling to be only a small stop-gap to a project that they believe will ultimately gain approval.

Friends of Nature, also not satisfied that the ruling goes far enough, lodged an appeal with the court on Jan 18.

The project developer told Beijing News it also intends to appeal the ruling.

Legal action

Conservationist Li Jing is one of the initiators of the litigation.

The head of Spoon-billed Sandpiper in China, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of migratory water birds — especially the critically endangered bird that gave it its name — Li is familiar with the area because she and her team members regularly monitor migrating waterbirds along eastern China's coastline.

"The mudflat at the estuary is truly a valuable ecosystem," she said. It serves as foraging and resting grounds for many migratory waterbirds, including at least five species under first-class State protection, such as the Dalmatian pelican and a relic gull, seven under second-class



A worker with Spoon-billed Sandpiper in China prepares to conclude a bird survey on an intertidal mudflat in Lianyungang, Jiangsu province, in August. YANG ZIYOU / FOR CHINA DAILY

Court halts Blue Bay project to protect bird habitats

Environmentalists fear ruling in Jiangsu's coastal Lianyungang may only be a temporary reprieve

State protection and 15 globally threatened or near-threatened species, all coming here to forage during their migration, she added.

Among them is the Asian dowitcher, a medium-large wader with a long straight blunt-tipped dark bill, medium-length legs and long wings, a near-threatened species on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List.

Li and her colleagues discovered that the sandpiper has a high dependency on the mudflat. In the spring of 2019 and 2020, over 90 percent of its global population, exceeding 20,000 birds, visited the mudflat to forage. "At the peak of migration, we counted more than 100,000 waders at the three estuaries in Lianyungang, including the Linhong Estuary," Li said.

Upon discovering the project signboard, Li was instantly alarmed. "My immediate concern was the extensive overlap between the project area and the bird habitat," she said.

The project reminded her of the Saemangeum reclamation project in South Korea, which resulted in irreversible losses for migratory shore birds. "After the project, the population of the great knot (a shorebird species) in that area declined from nearly 90,000 to a little more than 10,000," Li said.

To prevent a similar tragedy, the SSC decided to take action. They collaborated with several conservation organizations, including the Paulson Institute, to report the situation to relevant authorities. At the end of 2019, the project was suspended for a period but resumed shortly after.

In March 2021, the Friends of Nature joined them, requesting the disclosure of environmental assessment documents. The response they received was that the Blue Bay project complied with the approval process and was legal and compliant.

Stopping construction

Public information indicates Blue Bay is an ecological restoration project.

Timeline

- In April 2021, the Friends of Nature Environment Institute files a public interest civil lawsuit with the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court, suing Jinhai Development and Construction Co and the environmental assessment unit at Nanjing Normal University's Environmental Science and Technology Research Institute.

- Between March and April in 2022, the Central Environmental Protection Inspection Team tours the Lianyungang Blue Bay project.

- In February last year, the second round of the Central Ecological Environment Protection Inspection Team for Jiangsu province publicly announces that the Blue Bay project had not stopped the shoreline restoration project inside the national marine park of Haizhou Bay as required by

the relevant national departments. The project had raised the shoreline toward the sea by 60 to 100 meters, occupying approximately 143.6 hectares of the coastal wetlands of the marine park, violating the regulations for the development and construction of national marine parks.

- On Sept 6, the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court formally holds hearings of the case. The defendant assures the court that it will halt the embankment construction and sandy beach development.

- On Jan 4, Friends of Nature receives the court judgment.

- On Jan 18, the NGO decides to appeal.

CHEN LIANG

It is part of the coastal environmental remediation project for the Lianyungang New City Center, as outlined in Lianyungang city's overall urban plan (2015-2030). Nearly 20 square kilometers of land in Lianyungang New City was reclaimed from the sea, causing the loss of its original natural shoreline's ecological function.

The city government proposed the construction of the "Blue Bay" in Lianyungang New City, with the project to be undertaken by Jinhai Development and Construction Co.

The environmental assessment report shows that the project will effectively convert the ecological advantages of Lianyungang into economic benefits, bringing a series of environmental and ecological benefits, including significant improvement in seawater quality, providing excellent living space and

breeding habitat for various wetland organisms and effectively curbing environmental degradation trends.

Due to its emphasis on ecological restoration, the project even received 300 million yuan in special funding from the central government in April 2019.

"The time was urgent and the situation was critical. Every day, the construction was damaging the foraging grounds of birds," said He Yini, head of the legal team for the Blue Bay case from Friends of Nature.

In April 2021, the NGO filed a public interest civil lawsuit with the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court, suing Jinhai Development and Construction Co and the environmental assessment unit of Nanjing Normal University's Environmental Science and Technology Research Institute, request-

ing the stoppage of all construction activities, elimination of the ecological damage risk, ecological restoration of the damaged area and compensation.

After the court accepted the case, the NGO continued to submit complaint letters to relevant departments, and changes began to happen.

In November that year, the shoreline restoration project was suspended, followed by the suspension of the project's basement construction in January 2022.

From February to April 2022, the NGO submitted multiple letters of complaint to the Central Environmental Inspection Team and relevant authorities. A year later, the project was stopped by environmental protection inspection officials.

Restoration vs degradation

Due to the complexity of the case and its involvement in the specialized field of migratory bird protection, it has undergone three pre-trial meetings. One of the contentious issues in the case is whether the project is beneficial or harmful to the ecology.

Li revealed that the defendant has consistently emphasized that the project is an ecological restoration project. The court's judgment indicated that the practices within the project, such as planting vegetation at the shore, clearing invasive species and purchasing artificial fish ponds from fishermen, were intended to create habitats for waterbirds. Both the plaintiff and the defendant acknowledged during the trial that the number of bird species in the area in question had not decreased, and had even increased.

To Li and He, some damage had already been done.

Mud was excavated from a section of the mudflat to create a foundation for the shore in the construction of a sandy beach, He

said. As a result, certain areas of the mudflat were turned into ponds and pits, unsuitable for shorebirds to forage in.

"More ducks and egrets came to use the site," conceded Li. "But waders avoided the construction site."

He said: "When it comes to ecological restoration, most people naturally assume it is beneficial to the ecology, and that the plaintiff must prove that it has actually caused ecological damage. This is the biggest challenge we face."

Many experts have reacted to January's ruling and are eager to see how the appeals develop.

"This is a significant advancement in environmental tort and environmental public interest civil case adjudication, further implementing the provisions of the Environmental Protection Law," Wang Canfa, an environmental law scholar and a long-term observer of the case, told Beijing News.

He believes the ruling serves as a warning to all environmental assessment units. If they intentionally falsify information, omit evaluation factors, fabricate data or draw false evaluation conclusions, they may not only be subject to administrative penalties, but also be liable for damages together with the construction unit.

Another positive aspect of the first-instance judgment is that the court acknowledged the "real risk of ecological damage" posed by the Blue Bay project.

The case is a rare preventative public interest lawsuit against the reclamation of coastal wetlands in China, He said.

She explained that generally, lawsuits are based on consequences and damages, whereas preventative litigation is based on risks. "In the environmental field, it is always based on risks. The destruction of mudflats and the extinction of species are irreversible," He said.

Why appeal?

The court also concluded that the existing evidence could not prove that the completed parts of the project had caused ecological damage or posed an ecological risk. Therefore, the court did not support the plaintiff's requests for eliminating risks, ecological restoration, compensation for losses and an apology.

Cai Zhiyang, an assistant professor of environmental science at Duke Kunshan University in Suzhou, Jiangsu, who has long been concerned about the population of Asian dowitchers in the waters of Lianyungang, told Beijing News that researchers had attached satellite trackers to several dowitchers of the population migrating in the area.

The research results showed that after the construction of the project began, there were almost no Asian dowitchers landing in the semi-circular construction area. "In other words, the area is no longer suitable for them to forage," Cai said.

This research result was also submitted as evidence to the court by the plaintiff. However, the judgment stated that the number of dowitchers providing flight trajectory maps was too small to prove a significant decrease in the number of birds in the area.

Friends of Nature believes that the judgment only supporting a temporary halt to construction does not completely eliminate the significant risk of the project damaging the natural foraging grounds of waterbirds.

"Despite the developer's assurance to halt the embankment construction and sandy beach development, we believe the completed part of the project has already caused ecological harm, and thus, the developer is obligated to restore and compensate for the damage," He said.

The legal battle continues.



From left: Workers with Spoon-billed Sandpiper in China count birds at the Blue Bay project site in Lianyungang, Jiangsu, in 2020. HE TAO / FOR CHINA DAILY Asian dowitchers feed on the mudflat in Lianyungang during their autumn migration. LI YUNFENG / FOR CHINA DAILY An aerial photo shows part of the Blue Bay project site. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



WORLD

China's telecom firms call for collaborations

Latest achievements aiming to promote sustainability showcased in Barcelona

By ZHENG WANYIN
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Artificial intelligence applications across devices and networks, advances in 5G and 6G technologies, and the way they have been rapidly reshaping the telecommunications industry have been among major topics discussed at this year's Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain.

Chinese companies have showcased their latest achievements and organized panel discussions at the event. They said they are expecting to boost cooperation in the mobile communications industry.

Huawei hosted industry partners and opinion leaders for a roundtable discussion on Monday of the acceleration of industrial intelligence to promote sustainable development.

The roundtable session, co-hosted by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, aimed to foster the use of AI in industries and manufacturing as part of a global initiative co-launched by UNIDO, Huawei and other partners.

The discussion revolved around the role of 5G-Advanced technologies and AI in helping address global challenges, including climate change.

Yu Liang, vice-president of Huawei Cloud Global Ecosystem for the Europe, Middle East and Central Asia region, shared how the company has collaborated with stakeholders to further sustainability.

Among achievements, Huawei Cloud's Pangu-Weather Model, an AI model for global weather forecasting, was adopted last year by the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts. The model has achieved more precision, with faster prediction speeds that can help reduce disruptive effects of natural disasters such as typhoons, Yu said.

In the United Kingdom, Huawei's AI technologies have been deployed in collaboration with local institutions and international nonprofits to help experts assess and monitor the population of the red squirrel, an endangered species in the country.

"All these benefits can be achieved not only by Huawei technologies, but also by a very enriched ecosystem of the whole world," Yu said. "That is why we worked with our partners to develop well-connected solutions for our industries."

Also on Monday, China Mobile held a series of launches, particularly highlighting its latest innovations in 5G-Advanced technologies.

The company is also working hard to explore key technologies and application scenarios for the sixth-generation mobile networks.

Huang Yuhong, general manager of China Mobile Research Institute, said China Mobile is willing to share its experiences with the world, and the development of the telecommunications industry requires collective thinking and close cooperation from all parties.

"For example, when it comes to 5G-Advanced or 6G standardization, without unified global standards, large-scale production cannot be achieved and industries cannot gain cost advantages," she said. "Therefore, we are willing to share with the world, as we understand that our openness can promote cooperation in this era, thus bringing everyone together."

Dialogue mechanisms

Thorsten Jelinek, a senior fellow and Europe director at the Beijing-based think tank Taihe Institute, said dialogue mechanisms also need to be encouraged, noting that countries are more concerned now with digital security issues.

The positive news is that there are some collaborative activities on the table, especially between China and the European Union, which could enhance trust and identify areas of collaboration, Jelinek said.

"I saw some changes in 2023 and maybe going forward in 2024. The EU has a lot of dialogue with China. There are some high-level meetings around ICT (information and communications technology), data and science," he said.

Ashraf Abushady, a senior adviser on digital transformation and AI at the UN Industrial Development Organization, said promoting multilateralism is an approach to foster communications and exchanges. He suggested that governments, academics and businesses all be included in the dialogue.

John Hoffman, CEO of the Global System for Mobile Communications Association, organizer of the Mobile World Congress, said: "The only way we can be successful is to have public-private partnerships and global collaboration."



Maasai community villagers in Kenya take part in a dialogue workshop organized by the nonprofit Amref Health Africa that aims to eliminate female genital mutilation, in Suswa town, Narok County, on Jan 16. WU XIAOHUI / CHINA DAILY

Africa vows to end female genital mutilation

By EDITH MUTETHYA
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At a church compound in Suswa town in Narok County, Kenya, couples listened attentively, nodding and applauding as experts explained the consequences of the practice of female genital mutilation.

At the end of the hourlong dialogue, both men and women committed to abandoning the practice that has long violated the rights of women and girls and compromised their health.

Female genital mutilation, or FGM, is a traditional practice that exists in 30 countries, primarily in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. It refers to all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for nonmedical reasons, the United Nations Children's Fund said.

FGM has no health benefits for girls and women, and can lead to severe bleeding, difficulty in urinating, and later complications such as cysts, infections and childbirth complications, as well as an increased risk of newborn deaths.

More than 200 million girls and women alive have undergone FGM worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. Deeply rooted gender inequality and cultural beliefs continue to perpetuate the prevalence of the practice, despite legal efforts to eradicate it in many countries.

In Kenya, the prevalence of FGM is still as high as 15 percent, despite the practice being outlawed. This figure is down from 21 percent 10 years ago, indicating that 15 percent of girls and women aged 15 to 49 have been circumcised, UNICEF said.

After attending the dialogue session with his wife, 27-year-old father of two Nelson Nkalo vowed his daughter will not undergo FGM.

This decision was influenced by talks from experts during the dialogue and his personal experience of witnessing the ordeal that his wife, after undergoing the procedure, went through during and after childbirth.

"My wife took two months to recover and be able to perform any household chores. Those who have not undergone the cutting take less than a month to heal. She also

"We are no longer talking about (female genital mutilation) as a cultural issue or just a simple harmful practice. It's a crime, it is a violation of the rights of women and girls."

David Kawai, manager of the Girl Generation: Support to Africa-Led Movement to End FGM program

risked hemorrhage during childbirth," he said.

Traditionally, a girl who has undergone FGM is viewed as virtuous and ready for marriage — a good way for parents to receive a bride price and generate income. In the Maasai community in Kenya, girls undergo FGM between the ages of 12 and 14, resulting in them dropping out of school and getting married at a young age.

On the other hand, an "uncut" girl is regarded as a "child", and may face isolation and the possibility of not receiving a marriage proposal. FGM is also believed to improve women's morality by reducing sexual urges, leading to the assumption that they will remain faithful in marriage.

Enlightened advocates

Abraham Tumpes, a Maasai elder with three wives and 20 children, is one of the leading advocates against FGM.

Noitui Kaleke, who used to perform the procedure, has renounced the practice after taking part in the dialogue that she said enlightened her. She is now a champion for the anti-FGM movement, with a special focus on reforming those performing FGM.

The dialogue was held under the Girl Generation: Support to Africa-Led Movement to End FGM, a program under the Kenya-based Amref Health Africa, the largest health development nonprofit in Africa. The program aims at significantly reducing the practice of FGM in Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal and Somalia by 2027.

David Kawai, manager of the program, said they are implementing core models, and following that they will conduct an assessment to determine which models have been successful, and then scale their implementation in other regions and countries.

"We have given teams in those countries a mandate to come up with their own concept of what works. In Kenya, for example, we are implementing intergenerational discussions in the community. We have intergenerational discussions, couples' discussions in villages, school programs and youth clubs," Kawai said.

In Senegal, the program utilizes a road caravan, in which trained advocates travel from town to town to educate people about the consequences of FGM.

They also carry out survivor leadership training, empowering survivors of FGM to take the lead in ending the practice, because they possess a deep understanding of the problem and how to effectively communicate about it.

"In the four countries the program is active, we are moving forward, we are getting lessons and documenting them," Kawai said. "We want to produce some global goods that can be shared worldwide for people to know what works to end FGM in Africa."

Insecurity in the countries has been a major challenge in implementing the program, he said.

Thanks to the program, communities have opened up and are speaking out about FGM, he said, and girls can now say no to the practice and argue with their parents against it.

Boys have also changed their attitude toward the practice and are now marrying girls who have not undergone FGM.

"We are no longer talking about FGM as a cultural issue or just a simple harmful practice. It's a crime, it is a violation of the rights of women and girls," he said.

Geoffrey Ongaki, a teacher in Narok, said: "If students are enlightened, they will be educated and enlighten others in society, and the (practice) will end."



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France says no to US on Russian assets seizure

By JONATHAN POWELL
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French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire has contested the United States' stance on monetizing frozen Russian assets, revealing divisions among G7 countries over the issue.

"I want to be very clear: We currently have no legal basis for the seizure of Russian assets," Le Maire said on the sidelines of a gathering of G20 finance ministers in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on Wednesday.

His comments highlight geopolitical tensions at the event and discord among close allies on how to handle Russian assets blocked by Western powers since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, Reuters commented.

"We need to keep working ... The G7 must act in compliance with the rule of law," Le Maire was quoted by Agence France-Presse as saying.

"This legal basis must be accepted not only by European countries, not only by G7 countries, but by all member states of the world community, and I mean by all the member states of the G20. We should not add any kind of division among the G20 countries."

The G7 finance ministers, who met ahead of G20 discussions, deliberated on whether the frozen assets could be utilized to aid in the reconstruction of Ukraine.

On Tuesday, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen expressed her belief that there existed a robust legal foundation in international law to extract value from the Russian assets, which amount to about \$300 billion, either through collateral or seizure.

'Insufficient grounding'

Le Maire's comments assert that France firmly believes there is insufficient grounding in international law to proceed with the seizure of Russian assets, and emphasize the need for further deliberation.

Any actions must be firmly rooted in international law and must garner the backing of all members of the G20 major economies, including Russia, he said.

Russia's Foreign Ministry previously denounced the freezing of Russian assets in Europe as theft, saying the actions targeted not only private individuals' funds, but also Russian state assets. Russia has warned of retaliation should the West move forward with the seizure of the assets.

Experts cited by Reuters said the process of unlocking value from the assets could extend over a year or more. For this to happen, most, if not all, countries possessing Russian assets would need to enact domestic legislation to enable such actions.

G7 officials have been grappling more than a year to determine the fate of Russian sovereign assets frozen following the conflict in Ukraine. G7 leaders have set a deadline for proposing potential resolutions by June.

The European Commission has suggested using interest accrued on the assets, leveraging the funds as collateral for loans for Ukraine, or providing direct financial assistance to Ukraine.

Agencies contributed to this story.



People try out ZTE's latest 5G+AI 3D tablet at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain, on Wednesday. GAO JING / XINHUA

West accused of dragging Russia into arms race

By REN QI in Moscow
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Western countries attempted to draw Russia into an arms race while seeking to weaken it from within, but unsuccessfully, Russian President Vladimir Putin said during his more than two-hour-long state-of-the-nation address on Thursday.

"They essentially would like to do to Russia exactly what they did to many other regions of the world, including Ukraine: bring discord to our home and weaken us from within. But they miscalculated," the president said.

Putin made the remarks at his 19th state-of-the-nation address in Moscow. According to Putin's press

secretary Dmitry Peskov, the Russian president had been working on the text of the address personally this year, and has had "dozens of phone and face-to-face contacts" with ministers, deputy prime ministers and other government officials.

About 1,000 people were invited to the ceremony. They included members of both houses of Russia's parliament, government and presidential administration officials, heads of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, members of the State Council and Public Chamber, governors, representatives of religious organizations, diplomats, and journalists, including foreign ones.

In his address, Putin told Western

countries on Thursday they risked provoking a nuclear war if they sent troops to fight in Ukraine, warning that Moscow had the weapons to strike targets in the West.

"Western nations must realize that we also have weapons that can hit targets on their territory. All this really threatens a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons and the destruction of civilization. Don't they get that?" said Putin, highlighting Russia's vastly modernized nuclear arsenal.

"Strategic nuclear forces are in a state of full readiness," he said, noting that new-generation hypersonic nuclear weapons he first spoke about in 2018 had either been deployed or were at a stage where development

and testing were being completed.

Visibly angry, Putin suggested Western politicians recall the fate of those like Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler and France's Napoleon Bonaparte who had unsuccessfully invaded Russia in the past.

"But now the consequences will be far more tragic," said Putin, accusing Western politicians of forgetting what real war meant because they had not faced the same security challenges as Russians had in the last three decades.

Putin accused the West of forcing Russia into an arms race and said Moscow's "strategic nuclear forces are in a state of full readiness for use", though he warned that a global nuclear conflict would "destroy civilization".

"They (in the West) should finally understand — and I just told them — that we too have weapons that can destroy targets on their territories," he said.

Moving to domestic policies, Putin announced a slew of new national projects, including those providing state financial support to Russian families and youth, as well as job skills training in the high-tech sector.

Outpacing US economy

He also said that Russia's economy grew at a rate higher than the global average in 2023, outpacing that of the United States and other G7 countries despite facing a wide array of sanctions and being cut off from Western markets.

Putin set out Russia's production goals for 2030, calling on domestic

manufacturers to ramp up production of high-tech goods by 150 percent. Among other priority areas for boosting domestic manufacturing, he listed consumer products, medicine and automobiles.

He urged companies to keep their assets in the country by promising "minimal" and "risk-oriented" business inspections starting in 2025, while also calling for an amnesty for small businesses accused of tax evasion.

By the end of his address, Putin made clear that he sees Russia's military victory over Ukraine as the true measure of the country's success and the key to its future. "I believe in our victories and success and in the future of Russia," Putin said.

WORLDUS

Biden, Trump vie on Texas border on same day

By MAY ZHOU in Houston
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US President Joe Biden and Donald Trump, his likely GOP challenger in the upcoming presidential election, had a same-day showdown on border security in Texas on Thursday.

About 325 miles apart, at one end in Eagle Pass with barbed wire serving as a border barrier in the background, Trump praised Texas Governor Abbott's efforts to secure the border and accused Biden of allowing millions of migrants to "invade" the US; at the other end in Brownsville inside a building, Biden asked the former president and GOP lawmakers to work with him on immigration reform.

Biden said that he received a briefing from Border Patrol and asylum officers and was aware of the pressing conditions at the border. "They desperately need more resources, need more agents, more officers, more judges, more equipment in order to secure our border," Biden said. "We can't wait any longer."

Biden asked the GOP to reconsider a bipartisan immigration bill that passed the Senate in early February but was not taken up in the House of Representatives, with Democrats accusing House Republicans of acting politically on behalf of Trump.

The bill would have tightened laws on migration and given the president the authority to close the border.

Biden said that those who opposed the bill "need to set politics aside and pass it on the merits, not on whether it benefits one party or the other party."

Saying the bill is a win for the American people, Biden dared Trump to work with him: "So here's what I would say to Mr. Trump. Instead of playing politics with the issue, instead of telling members of Congress to block this legislation, join me."

Trump frequently mentioned Biden in his comments.

He called the border crossing of migrants "Biden's invasion" and "Biden's migrant crime," and accused the president of transporting columns of "fighting-age men" to America, adding that by the time Biden is out of office, the number "could be 15 million, could be 18 million".

Trump also listed alleged crimes committed by migrants: more than 33,000 assaults, 3,000 robberies, 6,900 burglaries, 7,500 weapons offenses, 4,300 sex crimes, 1,600 kidnappings, and 1,700 homicides and murders.

Trump said the migrants are coming from prisons, mental institutions, insane asylums, and "they're terrorists".

Trump also talked extensively about the killing of 22-year-old

nursing student Laken Riley, who was found dead on Feb 22 on the University of Georgia campus in Athens. The suspect is a 26-year-old migrant from Venezuela who entered the US in 2022 and was then released.

He also was arrested in New York City in August but released before Immigration and Customs Enforcement could ask New York officials to detain him, according to CBS News. The Georgia case has become a hot topic about immigration policy.

On Thursday, the Republican-led Georgia House of Representatives by a 97-74 vote approved a bill to require local police to arrest with probable cause anyone suspected of being in the country illegally and to detain them for deportation.

"Biden is playing the politics in an old-fashioned way. He is doing what he can with the GOP members. I don't think he will get the collaboration he wants from them," Matthew Schwartz, an engineer in Houston, said after watching the speeches. "Trump is making nonsensical statements which are likely emotionally appealing to his base."

Also on Thursday, US District Court Judge Davide Erza ordered the Texas state government to suspend a law that would allow state law enforcement officers to arrest migrants under the trespassing law.

"If allowed to proceed, SB 4 could open the door to each state passing its own version of immigration laws," Ezra wrote in a preliminary injunction against the law.

He rejected the state's argument that the current influx of migrants across the southern border is an "invasion" that Texas has the right to stop unilaterally. "SB 4 threatens the fundamental notion that the United States must regulate immigration with one voice," Ezra wrote.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott said he will challenge the decision. "Texas will immediately appeal this decision, and we will not back down in our fight to protect our state — and our nation — from President Biden's border crisis," Abbott said in a statement.

Others including the White House welcomed the judge's decision.

"Governor Abbott and other right-wing politicians need to stop wasting millions of Texas taxpayer dollars and lying to Texans that they are actually stopping immigrants," said Domingo Garcia, national president of The League of United Latin American Citizens.

He encouraged elected officials "to get down to the important business of addressing immigration reform in the interest of our country".



A resident sifts through the remains of his relative's home, which was destroyed by a wildfire in Canadian, Texas, on Wednesday. NICK OXFORD / REUTERS

Wildfire grows into one of Texas' largest as flames menace multiple small towns

CANADIAN, Texas — A cluster of wildfires scorched the Texas Panhandle on Wednesday, including a blaze that grew into one of the largest in state history, as flames moved with alarming speed and blackened the landscape across a vast stretch of small towns and cattle ranches.

At least one person has died in fast-spreading wildfires. However, authorities have yet to make a thorough search for victims and warned that the damage to some communities is extensive.

Known as the Smokehouse Creek Fire, the largest blaze spread to more than 3,370 square kilometers and jumped into parts of neighboring Oklahoma. It is now larger than the state of Rhode Island, and the Texas A&M Forest Service said the flames were only about 3 percent contained.

"I believe the fire will grow before it gets fully contained," Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, said.

The largest fire recorded in state history was the 2006 East Amarillo Complex Fire, which burned about 3,600 square kilometers and resulted in 13 deaths.

Walls of flames were pushed by powerful winds, while huge plumes of smoke billowed hundreds of feet in the air across the sparsely populated region. The smoke delayed aerial surveillance of the damage in some areas.

"There was one point where we

couldn't see anything," said Greg Downey, 57. "I didn't think we'd get out of it."

North of Amarillo, the small town of Fritch lost hundreds of homes in a 2014 fire and appeared to be hit hard again. Fritch Mayor Tom Ray said on Wednesday that an estimated 40 to 50 homes were destroyed on the southern edge. Ray said natural gas remained shut off for the town of 2,200.

Residents are probably not "prepared for what they're going to see if they pull into town", Hutchinson County Emergency Management spokesperson Deidra Thomas said in a social media livestream. She compared the damage to a tornado.

Authorities have not said what started the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes. Near Borger, a community of about 13,000 people, emergency officials answered questions from panicked residents on Facebook late on Tuesday and at one point told them to get ready to leave if they had not already.

Disaster declaration

Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties.

The encroaching flames caused the main facility that disassembles the United States' nuclear arsenal to pause operations on Tuesday.

Pantex Plant, located about 30

kilometers east of Texas Panhandle's largest city Amarillo, assembles and disassembles the country's nuclear arsenal.

All weapons and special materials are safe and unaffected, according to a statement from Consolidated Nuclear Security, which runs Pantex together with the US National Nuclear Security Administration.

It was open for normal work on Wednesday.

The Pantex nuclear weapon plant evacuated nonessential staff members on Tuesday night out of an "abundance of caution", said Laef Pendergraft, a spokesperson for the National Nuclear Security Administration's production office at Pantex. Firefighters remained in case of an emergency.

Pantex tweeted early on Wednesday that the facility was "open for normal day shift operations".

The Smokehouse Creek Fire spread from Texas into neighboring Roger Mills County in western Oklahoma, where officials encouraged people in the Durham area to flee. At least 13 homes burned in fires in the state's Panhandle region, officials said on Wednesday.

The weather forecast provided some hope for firefighters — cooler temperatures, less wind and possibly rain on Thursday. However, the situation was dire in some areas on Wednesday.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

UK urged to refrain from meddling in HK affairs

By ZHOU JIN
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China slammed the United Kingdom's groundless attacks on Thursday regarding Hong Kong legislation aimed at tackling national security crimes, urging London to stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning made the remarks after British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said in a statement on Wednesday that the legislation — Article 23 of the Basic Law of Hong Kong — breaches its international obligations in the Sino-British Joint Declaration, and would inhibit freedom of expression and threaten legitimate diplomatic activities in Hong Kong.

The HKSAR government conducted a public consultation on the Article 23 legislation from Jan 30 to Feb 28.

Beijing opposes the UK move that violently interfered in China's internal affairs, which again exposed the deeply entrenched colonial mindset and "judging" mentality of London, Mao told a daily news briefing.

Calling the UK's concerns "totally unfounded", the spokeswoman said London is by no means qualified or entitled by the Sino-British Joint Declaration to interfere in Hong Kong-related matters.

Mao explained that one of the principles of the legislation is to respect and protect human rights, as well as to protect the rights and freedoms enjoyed by Hong Kong residents in accordance with the Hong Kong Basic Law and relevant international conventions.

The normal activities of foreign institutions and personnel in the region will be protected in accordance with the law, she stressed, adding that it clearly distinguishes between acts that constitute crimes endangering national security and normal trade, cultural, scientific and technological activities.

Mao also criticized the UK's National Security Act that came into force last year, saying it has many vague provisions and a sweeping authorization for law enforcement agencies, which can be easily abused.

"We urge the UK to abandon its double standards, reflect on itself, and squarely face the fact that Hong Kong has already returned to China and stop meddling in the region's affairs," she said.

Briefly

CHINA Candid consultation held with Washington

China and the United States have engaged in a new round of policy consultation, China's Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Thursday. Miao Deyu, assistant foreign minister and director-general of the Department of Policy Planning of the Foreign Ministry, held a new round of foreign policy planning consultation with Salman Ahmed, director of the US Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff, in Shanghai on Tuesday. The two sides had candid, in-depth and constructive communication on foreign policies, international situations and regional hot spot issues.

UNITED STATES Biden 'continues to be fit for duty', doctor says

US President Joe Biden "continues to be fit for duty", his doctor wrote on Wednesday after conducting an annual physical checkup that is being closely watched as the 81-year-old seeks reelection in November. Kevin O'Connor, Biden's physician, wrote that the president is adjusting well to a new device that helps control his sleep apnea and has experienced some hip discomfort but also works out five times per week. Former president Donald Trump, 77, is the favorite to lock up the Republican nomination later this month, which would bring him closer to a November rematch against Biden.

ILLINOIS Illinois judge removes Trump from ballot

An Illinois state judge on Wednesday barred Donald Trump from appearing on Illinois Republican presidential primary ballot because of his role in the insurrection at the US Capitol on Jan 6, 2021, but she delayed her ruling from taking effect in light of an expected appeal by the former US president. A campaign spokesperson for Trump said this "is an unconstitutional ruling that we will quickly appeal". Meanwhile, the Supreme Court agreed on Wednesday to hear Trump's claim that as a former president he is immune from prosecution. The court scheduled arguments in the case for the week of April 22.

NEW ZEALAND 'Leap year glitch' shuts down some fuel pumps

A number of New Zealand petrol pumps stopped working on Thursday due to a "leap year glitch" in payment software, fuel stations and the payment service provider said. Allied Fuel, Gull, Z Energy and BP all confirmed some self-service fuel pumps they operate around New Zealand were not working due to issues with the payment system used. John Scott, chief executive of Invenco Group, said the system had stopped working due to a "leap year glitch". It needed to be rolled out to affected fuel pumps around the country, Scott said.

CHINA DAILY—AGENCIES

McConnell to step down as Senate Republican leader at end of year

WASHINGTON — Top US Senate Republican Mitch McConnell said on Wednesday he will step down this year from his leadership role, ending a record-setting tenure.

McConnell, who has represented Kentucky in the Senate since 1985 and has been his party's leader since 2007, gleefully embraced the nickname "Grim Reaper" for his willingness to use the levers of power to stonewall Democratic goals, whether as majority leader or, as is currently the case, minority leader.

"I turned 82 last week. The end of my contributions are closer than I prefer," McConnell said on the Senate floor, his voice breaking with emotion.

"Father Time remains undefeated. I'm no longer the young man sit-

ting in the back hoping colleagues remember my name. It's time for the next generation of leadership."

His tenure of nearly 17 years as a Senate party leader is the longest on record.

A leadership transition is set to take place in November when an election will be held to choose his replacement. The newly elected leader will assume office in January.

McConnell is seen by fellow lawmakers as a skilled strategist in politics and one of the most powerful figures in Washington. Collaborating with then-president Donald Trump, McConnell played a pivotal role in passing a comprehensive \$1.5 trillion tax cut bill in 2017.

However, McConnell's once significant sway over the Senate GOP



Mitch McConnell

has waned in the past year as the party increasingly aligns itself with Trump, who maintains a notably strained relationship with the Republican leader.

The rift between Trump and McConnell was exacerbated by the events of the Capitol riot on Jan 6, 2021. Despite voting to acquit Trump in the subsequent impeachment trial, McConnell asserted that the former president bore substantial moral responsibility for inciting the events of that day.

John Thune, the No 2 Senate Republican, John Cornyn and John Barrasso were expected to vie for the top party job.

It was unclear what other senators might jump into the race.

Meanwhile, Congressional leaders announced on Wednesday they have reached a tentative agreement to prevent a government shutdown for now, days before an end-of-the-week deadline that risked shuttering some federal operations.

Temporary funding

Under the new plan, Congress would temporarily fund one set of federal agencies through March 8 and another set through March 22.

In the meantime, Congress will try to draft and pass packages of leg-

islation to fund the government for the remainder of the budget year.

"We are in agreement that Congress must work in a bipartisan manner to fund our government," said the joint statement from House Speaker Mike Johnson, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Republican Leader McConnell and House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, along with the Appropriations Committee leaders.

Johnson said the House would vote on Thursday to approve the temporary funds — ahead of Friday's deadline — when some federal monies run out. The Senate would be expected to vote next.

The deal comes together as negotiators in Congress have been working to finish up a federal spending

plan while Washington joined Ukraine and other US allies around the world in watching and waiting for Johnson's next move.

"As the President and Congressional Leaders made clear at yesterday's meeting, we cannot allow a government shutdown," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement. She said the agreement reached would help prevent a "needless" federal shutdown.

Congress is in what has become a familiar cycle of threatened shutdowns and disruptions as hard-right Republicans in Johnson's majority strive for steeper spending reductions than Democrats and even some other Republicans are willing to accept. This would be the fourth short-term funding extension in about five months.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

GLOBAL LENS



Thai performers wearing colorful costumes and elaborate makeup from the Tie Kia Tong Chia Sung Hiang Chinese Teochew Opera troupe showcase their skills during the birthday celebration of the Godfather Pung Tao Kong festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on Feb 24. PHOTOS BY PONGMANAT TASIRI / NEWS.COM

CONTINUING CULTURE ABROAD

Teochew Opera helps to keep Chinese heritage alive in Thailand

Amid celebrations for the Godfather Pung Tao Kong festival, Thai performers from the Tie Kia Tong Chia Sung Hiang Chinese Teochew Opera troupe delighted audiences on Feb 24, which also marked the traditional Lantern Festival.

Pung Tao Kong is highly respected by many overseas Chinese and the deity is representative of pioneer groups of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia.

Similar to Chinese opera in other countries worldwide, the Thai performers are a product of a broader Chinese diaspora preserving and protecting heritage and culture dating to the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

The arrival of many Chinese migrants in Thailand can be traced to the 13th century. Today, about 14 percent of the Thai population is ethnically Chinese, making the Southeast Asian country home to one of the largest Chinese communities outside China, according to World Population Review figures.

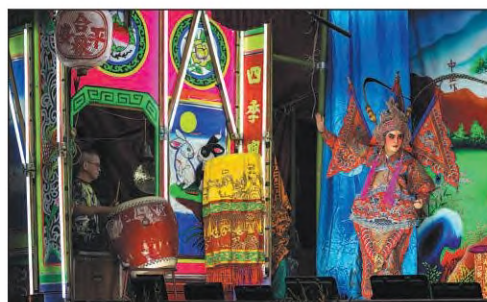
Chinese opera mixes a colorful array of aspects, from martial arts to dancing and singing, accompanied by traditional music played on instruments such as the *pipa*, a four-stringed lute and hammered dulcimer. The Thai performers use the southern Chinese Teochew dialect.

Most performers spend about two hours for their makeup and hairstyles in their acts, transforming into gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, as well as villains, from Chinese mythology and folklore.

With aging communities and audiences, there are growing concerns over the survival of Chinese opera and its practitioners facing dwindling incomes.

Many fans of the performances are Thai-Chinese elderly residents who hope their grandchildren can continue the cultural links passed down generations.

"As long as the Chinese shrines still exist and people still continue praying, any Chinese opera can survive," said Sai Yong Hong, a Thai performer of Chinese opera.



Top: Thai opera troupe performers apply makeup and prepare backstage during the birthday celebration of the Godfather Pung Tao Kong festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on Feb 24. **Center:** Audiences view a Chinese opera during the festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on Feb 24. **Above from left:** A Thai performer prepares backstage in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on Feb 24. Thai opera troupe members perform during the festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on Feb 24. Young spectators enjoy a Chinese opera amid the celebrations in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on Feb 24.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

BUSINESS

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Transparent, fairer market in the offing

CSRC's recent moves raise fresh hopes that bourses will become more stable

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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Chinese financial regulators' recent efforts to step up supervision and clamp down on illegal activities will help further improve the capital market ecosystem and inject more confidence into the market, said experts.

During a symposium held on Tuesday, Wu Qing, chairman of the China Securities Regulatory Commission, the nation's top securities regulator, said the capital market usually has high requirements in terms of regulation.

It is based on the rule of law so that the market can prosper. The CSRC will improve the efficiency in law enforcement and strengthen judicial guarantees so that the rule of law can play a greater role in the high-quality development of the capital market by consolidating its basis and stabilizing expectations, he said.

Participants in the symposium suggested that lawmaking or legislative amendments related to the supervision of listed companies, securities firms, investment funds and bonds, should be accelerated.

According to Tian Lihui, director of the Institute of Finance and Development at Nankai University, building an investor-based market is inseparable from the rule of law, including instituting an investor protection mechanism, strengthening information disclosure and strictly cracking down on violations. Only in this way can the market become fairer and transparent, leading to higher returns and the sustainability in financing, he said.

In response to earlier media reports that regulators will restrict direct market access-swap or DMA-Swap, a business in which private equity firms borrow from brokerages to trade, a CSRC spokesperson said on Wednesday that steadily reducing leverage in the DMA business is conducive to risk prevention and control as well as the market's stable operation.

In the DMA business, PE firms with long positions invest in a basket of stocks and use stock index futures as a hedge. Returns are generated from such hedging, explained the CSRC spokesperson.

Some PE firms suffered losses due to market volatility in the past and have been actively reducing exposure to such business, especially after trading resumed after the Spring Festival holiday. DMA-Swap products only

account for about 3 percent of the A-share market's daily trading volume now, according to the CSRC.

But oversight of over-the-counter derivative business such as DMA will be strengthened nevertheless, with the trading mechanism completed. The industry size and leverage will be controlled with better guidance. Violations will be cracked down upon to secure the stable operation of the market, said the CSRC.

Separately, the China Financial Futures Exchange announced late Wednesday that Shanghai Weiwang Fund Management and its actual controllers will be punished for exceeding the limit in trading stock index futures and failing to declare accounts with actual control relationships as required.

Three product accounts under Weiwang and two natural person accounts belonging to Weiwang's actual controllers will be barred from opening positions for 12 months. More than 8.9 million yuan (\$1.24 million) worth of illegal gains will be confiscated, according to the CFFEX's announcement.

The CSRC said later that it will work with the CFFEX to tighten scrutiny over high-frequency trading and crack down on misbehavior.

Gao Chao, chief researcher for nonbanking finance at Kaiyuan Securities, said that regulators have stepped up supervision as well as crackdowns on violations after Spring Festival. Such strong signals will help consolidate investor confidence and facilitate the healthy development of the capital market.

The CSRC announced six cases of punishment on Feb 22 regarding market manipulation and insider trading. On Feb 20, both the Shanghai and Shenzhen exchanges announced a three-day trading ban on leading quant fund Lingjun Investment for abnormal sell-offs a day earlier.

The A-share market responded positively to the regulators' latest moves. The benchmark Shanghai Composite Index gained 1.94 percent to close at 3015.17 points on Thursday while the Shenzhen Component Index spiked 3.13 percent.

Total trading value on the two bourses topped 1.05 trillion yuan on Thursday. Northbound capital — funds that overseas investors use to buy A shares via the stock connect program linking the Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hong Kong bourses — reported a net inflow of 16.6 billion yuan.



A view of the Shanghai Yangshan deep water port. JI HAIKIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Shanghai cooperation zone to bolster links between domestic, global players

By ZHONG NAN
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China's initiative to establish a global business cooperation zone in Shanghai will enhance international business communication, strengthening connections between domestic and global markets, government officials said on Thursday.

Speaking at a news conference in Beijing, he said that the move will create a new platform to boost the economy in the Yangtze River Delta region and across the country.

On Feb 19, the State Council, or China's Cabinet, approved the General Plan of Constructing Shanghai Eastern Hub International Business Cooperation Zone.

This aims to facilitate business meetings and negotiations, catering to the needs of short-term international business activities.

Located in an 880,000-square-meter area neighboring Shanghai Pudong International Airport, the zone allows foreign visitors to stay for up to 30 days upon arrival from the airport without verification of their visas.

Sun Yuning, vice-minister of the General Administration of Customs, said that the new zone is not a simple replication of any existing special zone type in China. Instead, it draws on, integrates and innovates the functions of various domestic and international zones.

"The main focus of this area is to promote international business exchanges by leveraging the international aviation hub," said Sun.

The zone builds on the foundation of the comprehensive bonded zone, Customs supervision zone and port area management system by introducing policies and measures to facilitate the entry and exit of individuals.

The construction of the new

“By creating a highly convenient platform for international business communications, the zone will better connect domestic and international markets, thereby contributing to a higher level of opening-up.”

Hua Yuan,
vice-mayor of Shanghai

zone's pilot area will be completed in 2025, and the entire zone will start operating under closed management in 2028 and be fully established by 2030.

Foreign institutions are also allowed to independently organize international-level economic and technical exhibitions within the zone, said Chen Zhenchong, director of the Department of Free Trade Zones and Special Control Area under the GAC.

The new zone will enrich Shanghai's status as an international aviation hub, leveraging the innovative achievements of the China (Shanghai) Pilot Free Trade Zone, said Hua Yuan, vice-mayor of Shanghai.

"By creating a highly convenient platform for international business communications, the zone will better connect domestic and international markets, thereby contributing to a higher level of opening up," said Hua.

Shanghai is home to more than 75,000 foreign-funded enterprises,

with 956 headquarters and 561 research and development centers, according to Shanghai's municipal government.

In addition to being a major destination in China for foreign visitors, Shanghai stands out as a major hub for foreign trade, with over 58,000 companies engaged in foreign trade activities. The city's trade volume represents over 3 percent of the world's total.

Zhu Min, director of the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Commerce, said that the Yangtze River Delta region is one of the most economically open and dynamic areas in China, with a large number of foreign trade and investment businesses having huge demand for cross-border interactions such as meetings, business negotiations, exhibitions and training.

To facilitate these activities, the T3 terminal of Shanghai Pudong International Airport is set to open in 2028, with the airport's total annual passenger capacity projected to reach 130 million. Moreover, Shanghai East Railway Station, with an annual design capacity of 60 million passengers, is slated for completion and operation by 2027. These facilities will serve as a key hub for the Yangtze River Delta region, according to the development plan of Shanghai's municipal government.

Earlier this week, Shanghai's municipal government certified 34 regional headquarters of multinational corporations and 17 foreign-funded research and development centers, data from the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Commerce showed.

The city's actual use of foreign direct investment exceeded \$24 billion in 2023, the fourth year in a row that it has surpassed the \$20-billion threshold.

Meeting brightens China-US biz ties

By ZHU WENQIAN
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China will firmly promote high-standard opening-up to the outside world and hopes that the member companies of the American Chamber of Commerce will continue to invest in the China market, a senior Chinese government official said.

Wang Shouwen, vice-minister of commerce, met with the chief executive of the US Chamber of Commerce Suzanne Clark in Beijing earlier this week. Clark was leading a delegation on a visit to China, the Ministry of Commerce said.

Wang said China-US economic and trade cooperation is a stabilizing force that helps strengthen bilateral relations. China would like to jointly drive the stable and healthy development of economic and trade relations between the two countries.

The two sides exchanged views on issues such as China-US economic and trade relations and the development of US enterprises in China.

According to the latest survey report released by AmCham China, 50 percent of the US companies surveyed rank China as their top or among the top three investment destinations.

"US companies have shown confidence in investing in China, which is another strong proof that China remains a global investment hot spot," He Yadong, a spokesman for the ministry, said during a news conference on Thursday.

"For four consecutive years, AmCham China has regarded the tension between China and the US as the biggest challenge, demonstrating its earnest expectation for the stable development of relations between the two countries," He said.

The ministry said China, together with the US, would like to create a favorable environment for pragmatic cooperation between the business communities of the two countries.

Meanwhile, China will continue to optimize its business environment, implement 24 measures for foreign-invested enterprises and help solve related problems, the Ministry of Commerce said during the news conference.

The guideline on the 24 measures for foreign-invested enterprises was issued by the State Council, China's Cabinet, last year. The main focus is on ramping up efforts to attract foreign investment. At a roundtable meeting with foreign-invested enterprises held by the ministry on Wednesday, most foreign companies said the measures have strengthened their confidence in investing in China.

Over 60 percent of the measures have been implemented or much progress has been made. Next, the Commerce Ministry will continue to work with relevant departments and local governments to promote the implementation of the measures, it said.

But, the Alliance for American Manufacturing earlier urged the US government to take steps to safeguard the US auto industry by raising tariffs on Chinese-made vehicles.

The Commerce Ministry said such measures would hinder fair competition and, in the long run, hinder the development of the US automotive industry itself. The ministry said it hopes that the US will abide by the laws of market competition and create favorable conditions for the long-term growth of the automotive industry.

"Chinese-made vehicles are widely popular globally, thanks to technological innovation and excellent quality that took shape amid fierce competition, and not by offering low prices. In recent years, the US has set up various obstacles and imposed tariffs to hinder the entry of Chinese-made cars into the US market," He said.



A pedestrian walks past the China Securities Regulatory Commission in Beijing. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Briefly

STAR ESG index to debut on March 21

A new index will debut on March 21 to help shareholders better assess how listed companies on the Science and Technology Innovation Board or STAR Market are managing issues related to environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria. The new index, the Shanghai Stock Exchange STAR ESG index, will select the top 50 listed companies in terms of ESG performance to mirror overall ESG

performance of the STAR Market.

PBOC adds liquidity via reverse repos

China's central bank conducted 117 billion yuan (\$16.47 billion) in seven-day reverse repos at an interest rate of 1.8 percent on Thursday. The move aims to keep liquidity stable at the end of the month, the People's Bank of China said in a statement.

XINHUA - CHINA DAILY

Beijing goes all out to fund AI tech

By DU JUAN
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Beijing is set to ramp up its investment guidance by establishing a fund to optimize the innovation of the artificial intelligence industry, with the initial phase already seeing 26 projects included with a scale of 350 million yuan (\$48.7 million), a senior official in the capital said on Thursday.

Yu Yingjie, a member of the CPC Leadership Group of Beijing municipal government, stated during a forum that the Beijing government plans to increase investment guidance in areas such as domestically produced AI chips and innovative algorithms for large-scale models.

"Apart from the initial 26 projects included, several others are currently undergoing evaluation processes. Meanwhile, we will attract social capital to increase investment efforts in order to drive the core technologies of AI and support the growth of innovative enterprises in the sector," Yu said.

The Beijing government is also

set to introduce a specialized talent plan for the field of AI, currently in the process of drafting specific measures to focus on cultivating top talent within the industry and attracting skilled professionals, Yu added.

Recently, Beijing has intensified its industrial support in line with its plans to establish itself as an international hub for technological innovation and a national application pilot zone for AI.

In January, Beijing established four funds focused on robotics, AI, pharmaceuticals and the information industry. Among these, the AI fund has a targeted total size of 10 billion yuan, with an initial target size of 4 billion yuan, as reported by Chinese media outlet Chinastar-market.cn.

Xu Jun, vice-president of Beijing-based Beiming Software Co, said the company has been cooperating with several AI enterprises — including Huawei — to explore the global market based on its advantages in computing power.

"The Beijing government has

been paying close attention to the AI industry and the policies are always swift and effective," she said. "AI is an emerging industry which needs more guidance from the government, and Beijing has been leading it."

During the 2nd Beijing AI Industry Innovation Development Conference, Western Beijing AI Valley signed agreements with four enterprises to jointly establish Beijing's first innovation AI computing cluster, and unveiled the data asset center of the Beijing International Data Exchange.

Lyu Chenfei, head of Mentougou district where Western Beijing AI Valley is located, said as one of Beijing's key AI development areas, Mentougou has leveraged its local conditions to find its own position within the AI industry, achieving coordinated development in tandem with traditional AI strongholds such as Haidian district.

"We warmly welcome related companies and talent to participate in the AI industry in Mentougou," he said.

BUSINESSFOCUS

By HUANG ZHILING
and PENG CHAO in Chengdu

While people from all over the country usually come to China's major cities to pursue their dreams, some urban youths have gone in a different direction.

More than 70 youngsters from cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen have settled in Tieniu village in Pujiang county of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province, as part of a "co-creation" experiment for rural revitalization.

Located about 50 kilometers from Chengdu's urban area, Tieniu village covers 9.59 square kilometers and is home to 1,073 households and 3,634 residents.

The villagers' main sources of income used to be tangerines, kiwis and fish farming.

"Due to limited development opportunities in the village, educated youth would migrate to cities," said Xu Bangmiao, Party secretary of the village.

The changes began in 2017, when rural revitalization was proposed as a key strategy at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, and Shi Guoping, a US-registered architect, was invited as the village's chief planner.

Shi refers to himself as a "researcher of rural life" who is conducting a "social experiment" to reconnect today's urban youth with the countryside.

In contrast to many villages keen to develop cultural tourism as their pillar industry, Shi believes that agriculture is the foundation of rural areas. He says rural revitalization must be firmly based on agriculture.

"Only by rooting themselves in agriculture can new residents truly understand rural areas, and deeply integrate with villagers," he said.

Tangerine capital

Tieniu is renowned for its tangerines, with 9,900 *mu* (660 hectares) of tangerine orchards, accounting for 78 percent of the total plantation area in the village. Therefore, Shi started his experiment with tangerines.

Although the Pujiang ugly tangerine has been recognized as a "national geographical indication protection product", its cultivation methods and industry model remain traditional. In recent years, it has faced issues such as excessive use of pesticides, soil acidification and fierce competition from homogeneous products.

To chart a new path for the tangerine industry, Shi started by restoring ecological balance and soil health through ecological planting methods.

"Ecological planting is the trend and an essential pathway for the sustainable development of agriculture. Someone must step up and undertake this endeavor," Shi said.

Shi and his team rented a tangerine orchard of 0.6 hectare and introduced an ecological agricultural production concept, replacing chemical fertilizers with organic ones and chemical control with green pest management methods.

After two years of trials, the tangerines produced from Shi's orchard gained market recognition. Despite a 40 percent reduction in yield per *mu* compared to traditional methods, the organic tangerines were sold at prices exceeding 20 yuan (\$2.8) per kilogram, about three times the price of regular ones.

"The green industry development concepts and models brought by the new villagers are exactly what we need most right now," Xu said.

Common development

Recognizing the benefits of ecological planting, 14 households in the village joined Shi's initiative last year, expanding the area of the ecological orchard to 2.7 hectares.

The first step for ecological planting is to improve the soil, which costs an average of 6,000 yuan per *mu*. "The villagers only need to spend 2,000 yuan per *mu*, and we will take care of the rest," said Cheng Xiaoqiong, a researcher on Shi's team.

The tangerines harvested from the ecological orchard are sold by an enterprise set up by the new villagers. "This year, the market price for regular tangerines is only 1 yuan per kilo, but we purchase the ecological ones from the villagers at 2 yuan," she said.

To ensure the villagers' shared prosperity, Shi's team jointly established a village-enterprise consortium with the collective economic cooperative of Tieniu.

"For every kilo of ecological tangerines we sell, 0.6 yuan from the



Rural revitalization efforts reap big success

Young residents from cities root themselves in agriculture to truly understand the countryside, deeply integrate with villagers



income will go into the account of the consortium, which will benefit all the villagers," Cheng said.

More attempts have been made by Shi and his team to achieve integrated development of agriculture, industry and the service sector in the village.

They have developed a range of products from fresh fruits, such as tangerine jam, dried tangerine, tangerine soda, tangerine wine and canned tangerines.

A series of activities have been planned and organized in the village, including the low-carbon lifestyle festival, the rural life festival, and the tangerine picking festival, bringing in more tourists.

The new villagers have also developed orchard tours and study tour programs, further promoting the development of rural

tourism in the village.

"The locally produced goods in the village are directly purchased by the tourists. More villagers have started their own farmhouses and homestays, and their businesses are thriving," Xu said.

He said the new villagers have not only brought in methods for industrial development and income generation, but also introduced new lifestyles and living concepts.

In addition to large-scale festive events, the new villagers have organized various forms of educational activities on weekends, such as parent-child lectures, English classes and paper-cutting training, bringing a pleasant change to the village.

"In the past, children in our village had to go to the city for these activities," Xu said.

He said more than a dozen young

people have returned home to start their own businesses after seeing the changes in the village.

Reasons to stay

Shi, who is in his 50s, was born and raised in a rural area in Central China's Hunan province. With the support of his parents, he went on to study in a big city, and later pursued further studies in the United States.

"For the first 40 years of my life, I had just one ordinary goal, which was to study hard and see the world outside," he said.

In 2013, while in Shanghai with his family, Shi was invited to plan for the Mingyue village in Pujiang by chance, which reconnected him with China's rural areas.

It was in Mingyue village that Shi first met Xu, who was also a skilled mason. Together with his brother, Xu was leading a rural construction team to help with the transformation and upgrading of the village.

"At that time, I thought, when the conditions are mature, I would also invite Mr Shi to do the planning for Tieniu," he said.

Four years later, with the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, Xu's wish came true.

Shi said it was only after returning to rural areas that he realized the importance of rural revitalization, and made up his mind to stay in the countryside and contribute to the revitalization of rural areas with his knowledge and efforts.

Shi said people in urban areas are increasingly pursuing a better quali-

ty of life as they become wealthier, and the demand for clean water, air, and soil in the countryside, as well as safe food, is growing steadily.

"On the other hand, the heavy work pressure and crowded spaces in cities can easily lead to self-isolation and trigger mental illnesses, while the open natural environment in rural areas makes it easier for people to open up their minds and relax," he added.

Shi said he wants to explore and create a more harmonious, healthy and sustainable way of life for the next generation.

In his view, Mingyue is built upon the foundation of cultural creativity and cultural tourism, aiming to create an ideal lifestyle that combines leisure and travel. Tieniu is, however, much closer to the essence of rural life, where he hopes to create a future lifestyle based on ecological and cultural revitalization.

In September 2020, Shi moved his family to Tieniu. His wife, Zhao Jing, who holds a PhD in biology, later established a community education center in the village.

Sustainable future

Shi believes the key to rural revitalization lies in talent, and it is essential to create conditions for talented people to work and live in rural areas.

To generate more job opportunities, Shi and his team have incubated four enterprises and two social organizations, forming a comprehensive platform for systematic research and practical implementation of rural revitalization and sustainable development.

The village has renovated vacant houses into free office spaces and dormitories for the new villagers, and provides free water, electricity and natural gas.

To date, the village has become home to over 70 urban youths from more than 20 cities across China, with another 300 living in the village occasionally.

"Most of the new residents have a good educational background, and come from diverse professional backgrounds, including finance and investment, architectural design, urban planning, culture and art, ecological agriculture, and innovative education," Shi said.

He said many people believe that moving to the countryside is an escape from reality or an act of "lying flat". However, it is quite the opposite in Tieniu.

"The new villagers view rural revitalization as a career where they can leverage their expertise and dedicate themselves to its continuous development," he said, adding they are more proactive, self-aware and responsible for their own quality of life.

Cheng, the researcher who is concerned about the impact of rural residents on climate change, came in the hope of practicing and advocating a low-carbon lifestyle.

She said life in Tieniu is what she had dreamed of, where she eats what she grows and works with like-minded young people from around the country.

"The experience in the village has allowed me to discover more possibilities for myself and learn to become a complete person," she said.

Over the past three years, Shi has accomplished the first phase of his rural experiment with an investment of 5 million yuan, achieving a balance between profit and cost.

"This year is crucial as we are entering a stage of massive development," he said.

The ecological orchard in the village will expand to 20 hectares this year, with over 100 households joining in, said Xu, who announced the news at the opening ceremony of the Pujiang Tangerine Picking Festival in January.

Xu said the village has started construction of a talent park project designed by Shi, aiming to provide larger and more comfortable space for new villagers to work and live in.

To attract more support, Shi's team launched a One Yuan Adoption program. Anyone who joins the program can adopt a tree in the ecological orchard for 365 yuan per year, and at the end of the year, they will receive four kilos of tangerines from the tree, along with a gift box containing fruit wine, chocolate and a woven item.

Nearly 3,000 people have joined the program, Shi said.

Shi said their ultimate goal is to realize ecological planting at all the tangerine groves in Tieniu.

"The goal is quite challenging, and the process depends on how many people participate," he said.

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“Ecological planting is the trend and an essential pathway for the sustainable development of agriculture. Someone must step up and undertake this endeavor.”

Shi Guoping, chief planner of Tieniu village in Chengdu, Sichuan province

660 hectares

planting area of tangerine orchards in Tieniu village, accounting for 78 percent of its total plantation area

Top: "New villagers", or youngsters from cities, have settled down in Tieniu village in Pujiang county of Chengdu, Sichuan province, to contribute to the local rural revitalization process.

Middle: A view of the countryside scenery in Tieniu village.

Bottom: Creative tangerine products with local cultural elements developed by "new villagers". PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

COMMENT

Editorials

Initiative taken to seek consensus on dousing fire of conflict in Ukraine

There has been little sign of the conflict in Ukraine coming to an end. It has now entered its third year and some Western governments are seemingly intent on prolonging it for as long as possible, even though the belligerent parties are locked in a bloody war of attrition in which neither side is gaining a significant advantage. There are also signs of growing public discontent at the money being spent by the United States and its European allies to support Ukraine's military capabilities as the money could be better used at home to support livelihoods and well-being.

French President Emmanuel Macron warned of the possibility of putting Western boots on the ground in Ukraine in order to prevent a Russian victory at a meeting of European leaders in Paris on Monday, putting the spotlight on how some Western leaders have been intent on reinforcing Kyiv's resolve to fight rather than seeking ways to bring an end to the conflict. With both the battlefields in Ukraine and Western aid to the country now gridlocked, Macron's words should help focus minds on now being the time to give peace a chance.

China certainly thinks it is an opportune moment to make renewed efforts to end the conflict. On Wednesday, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning announced that starting from March 2, Li Hui, China's special envoy on Eurasian affairs, will travel to Russia, the European Union headquarters, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and France on a diplo-

matic mission to push for a political settlement to the Ukraine crisis. This new diplomatic initiative demonstrates China's commitment to in-depth communications among the key stakeholders involved to resolve the conflict.

China is not party to the Ukraine conflict; it is impartial, having friendly relations with both the belligerents. It issued a position paper on Feb 24 last year, making clear its stance and elaborating on the political pathway it proposed to reach a settlement to the crisis. It also sent a special envoy to Europe to conduct the first round of shuttle diplomacy last May to solicit the views of different parties to see if there was any common ground on which a foothold could be found for a negotiated end to the conflict.

The Ukraine crisis has caused a huge loss of life and much suffering. It has also had wider ramifications, doing incalculable damage to the European economy, disrupting international supply chains, and has threatened the very fabric of regional peace and stability.

The most pressing priority is to stop the hostilities, launch peace talks and restore stability on the continent. Countries should give China's diplomatic initiative their full support. The death toll in Ukraine should trouble the conscience of all with any vestige of humanity. De-escalation of the fighting should be the primary goal to save lives and create favorable conditions for meaningful negotiations.

US to blame for LAC countries' aloofness

The Atlantic Council, a think tank based in Washington, has recently released a report titled "Redefining US Strategy with Latin America and the Caribbean for a New Era" that urges Washington to overhaul its strategy toward Latin America to effectively challenge China's growing influence in the region.

China has become the region's second-largest trading partner and third-largest investment source since 2012. The report fails to provide any evidence showing that burgeoning economic and trade cooperation threatens US interests or the US' relations with the region.

The challenges the US faces in Latin America, as the report acknowledges, are of its own making.

That being said, it is the US' own reduced engagement with the region, which has led to the LAC region strengthening its cooperation with not only China, but also Russia, Middle East countries, Japan and Europe. So the proposals the think tank put forward in the report for the US to outcompete China in Latin America totally miss the point.

On the one hand, the US cannot replace China to help Latin America consume its exports of mineral resources, energy and agricultural products, all of which the US also exports to China. On the other hand, the US cannot replace China to provide the region with electric vehicles, mechanical equipment and spare parts, steel, chemicals and other industrial products, as well as consumer goods, which are also what the US imports from China in large amounts.

Also, due to their focus on quick returns and lack of concern for local development, US enterprises

and capital are reluctant to make long-term investments in the region, particularly in the large infrastructure projects the region needs.

With a focus on such infrastructure, China has so far signed memorandums of understanding on the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative with 22 Latin American and Caribbean countries, and signed cooperation plans on the joint construction of the initiative with six of them.

China's cooperation with the region does not target any third party and promotes common development of the region. After being harnessed by the US under the Monroe Doctrine for so long, many Latin American countries have developed a strong desire to maintain their strategic autonomy.

All of China's projects in the countries are carried out on an equal footing and are of a win-win nature, rather than serving as a foothold for it to control the region.

The report underlines the significance of the US realigning on "shared values and interests" with Latin America. But the condescending manner of Washington in its free trade deal talks with regional countries, and its empty promises to them in the regional summits the US has hosted over the past few years all serve to indicate that the US still regards the region as a dumping ground for its products and a source of troubles and illegal immigrants.

Before the border walls and barbed wires are dismantled, which just tell how different the US thinks its values and interests are from those living on the other side of them, the report is nothing but empty talk.

Building tariff castles will only entrench trade war

According to a source at a major UK automaker cited by Politico, "the wheels have started turning" at the United Kingdom's Department for Business and Trade on an investigation into Chinese State subsidies for its electric vehicle makers.

Some UK automakers have been urging the UK government to launch such a probe with a view to getting protection. They are concerned that the Chinese-made EVs will be diverted to the UK market if the European Union slaps duties on Chinese EV imports when the EU's own probe wraps up later this year.

Apparently, UK Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch is preparing to instruct the UK's trade watchdog, the Trade Remedies Authority, to open an investigation since UK manufacturers "are worried about putting their heads above the parapet" by filing a complaint themselves, the Politico report quoted an unnamed consultant familiar with the plans as saying.

The UK manufacturers are hoping to have their cake and eat it too, as they are prompting the government to close the UK market to Chinese EV makers while they keep access to the Chinese market.

This creates something of a dilemma for the UK government as it is seeking to advance the country's green transition by accelerating the change-over to greener technologies such as EVs.

In getting the wheels of its trade defense machinery

turning, the UK should turn its gaze toward the EU's anti-subsidy probe which could end up with Germany's export-led economy becoming the main victim as its automakers are heavily invested in, and exposed to, China, which will be forced to respond should the EU build a defensive castle for its EV industry.

Both the EU and the UK should realize that Chinese EVs can be sold at lower prices not because of government subsidies, but because the Chinese EV makers have higher efficiencies that lower their costs. In the words of Michael Shu, European president of BYD, "we have unique technology ... and our management efficiency is high."

Instead of seeking further protection for their uncompetitiveness, EU and UK companies should sharpen their own technologies and enhance their own efficiency. The German Association of the Automotive Industry has said that relying solely on anti-subsidy inquiries fails to tackle the urgent competitiveness challenges faced by Europe. The UK has already been "supporting" its own domestic EV industry as part of a £4.5 billion investment program for key manufacturing industries.

Any trade protection measures taken against Chinese products will harm normal trade exchanges and hinder efforts to green economies. Only with greater inclusivity and fairness can EVs bring convenience to all.

Luo Jie



Opinion Line

China's economy will always be a powerful engine of global growth

China's gross domestic product exceeded 126 trillion yuan (\$17.51 trillion) in 2023, an increase of 5.2 percent over the previous year, higher than the global growth rate of about 3 percent. Calculated in comparable prices, China's newly increased economic output in the year surpassed 6 trillion yuan, equal to the output of a medium-sized economy.

A Spanish newspaper said the growth was five times that of the eurozone, and some international observers have said the Chinese economy is expected to contribute more than 30 percent to world economic growth, remaining the largest engine of the world economy.

However, some people in the United States-led West are always making irresponsible remarks about China's economy, such as saying "China's economic growth is not as expected" or "China's development momentum is not strong".

Any country's economic growth is bound to decline after its economic aggregate and per capita income rise to a certain level. China's economy has always stayed within a reasonable growth range. From 2020 to 2022, the Chinese economy withstood the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and realized an average annual GDP growth rate of around 4.5 percent, higher than the 2 percent global average.

In today's China, traditional industries are undergoing transformation and upgrading, emerging industries are booming, prospective industries are poised for growth and new productive forces are growing at a faster pace. A World Intellectual Property Organization report shows that China rose to the 12th place in the Global Innovation Index in 2023. The increased investments made by European companies such as Volkswagen, Airbus and Mercedes-

Benz in China strongly testify to the huge "magnetic force" of the "innovation field" of the Chinese economy.

While some developed economies were seeing the highest inflation rate since 1982, China's economy has not only consolidated its growth, but also stabilized the momentum. In contrast with food and energy crises in many countries last year, China's grain output reached a record high and its energy supply remained stable on the whole.

In recent years, the Chinese government has taken a series of effective measures to address risks in real estate, local debt and small and medium-sized financial institutions in a coordinated manner, putting its economy on a solid footing. Despite facing some cyclical and structural challenges, China's economy remains dynamic and resilient, and it continues to be a powerful engine of global growth.

—PEOPLE'S DAILY

Uncleared debts clear and present danger

Local governments across the country have recently been urged to address their overdue payments to enterprises. The Private Economy Promotion Law, which is currently in the legislation stage, will also focus on the issue.

Overdue debts can affect not only the enterprises directly concerned, but also the upstream and downstream of the industry chains, thereby affecting employment and consumption.

Timely clearance of overdue pay-

ments is one of the most important ways for local governments to show their contract spirit and legal consciousness, and improve their performance capability, so as to help enhance enterprises' trust of them.

Some local governments do face significant debt repayment pressure. However, it is all the more necessary to find ways to raise funds and fulfill contractual obligations because unresolved overdue payments to enterprises are a drag on their development and con-

strain local economic development as a whole.

It is necessary to continue strengthening supervision and assessment of the overdue debt clearance work of local governments at all levels and to open up channels for protecting enterprises' rights. Any clue about power abuses and corruption that have been reported to the higher authorities in the process must be taken seriously.

—BEIJING NEWS

What They Say

Human errors and subterfuge risk amplifying disaster

Japan commenced its fourth release of nuclear-contaminated wastewater from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the Pacific Ocean on Wednesday, local media reported.

Despite the concerns and opposition it has faced both at home and abroad, Tokyo Electric Power Company announced that it would discharge about 7,800 metric tons of the wastewater, a similar amount to the previous three rounds, over about 17 days.

Domestic opposition and distrust were rekindled after TEPCO admitted that on Feb 7 about 5.5 tons of water containing radioactive materials had leaked from the outlet of a device used to purify nuclear-contaminated water at the Fukushima plant, and the water may contain 22 billion becquerels of radioactive materials such as cesium and strontium.

According to TEPCO, human error was deemed to be the cause of the leak, as 10 out of the 16 valves of the device that should have been closed were open. In

October last year, five workers were directly exposed to liquid waste containing radioactive materials at the plant.

Such "human errors" have been reported at least twice since the discharge of the nuclear-contaminated water started in August last year and the discharge process will take at least 30 years. It is inevitable that there will be more human errors in the coming years, and the likelihood of some being even more serious is almost unavoidable.

That proves the "mature" and "effective" processing technologies and discharge process are not as safe and reliable as the Japanese government bragged about to the International Atomic Energy Agency and the international community.

In all probability, there must be weaknesses in the technology or loopholes in the management systems that Tokyo has covered up from the very beginning. Otherwise these "human errors" would not have happened so frequently.

If the processed water TEPCO discharges into the ocean is so clean to be even "drinkable" and its environmental impacts can be ignored, as some Japanese politicians have claimed, why is the wastewater being discharged into the sea, where the ocean currents will disperse it from the Japanese coast, rather than being used for agriculture or other purposes. After all, usable water is a scarce resource. Reinforcing the concerns, the Japanese government has admitted that the cumulative effects of discharging the wastewater for 30 years in the ocean are still unpredictable despite the water being clean.

Japan's refusal to allow any country opposing the discharge to carry out independent on-the-spot sampling and investigation into the safety of the water it is releasing into the ocean, and its compensation to the domestic fishing industry are both telling signs that it does not believe its own claims that the water is safe to discharge into the ocean.

—LIYANG, CHINA DAILY

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COMMENT

Mei Bing

Emotional cultivation crucial for youth

In order to ensure that the next generation can effectively adapt to society through education, it is essential to foster the holistic development of youths in all aspects of life, including in moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic fields. Yet, amid the ongoing discourse on education reform and the pursuit to strengthen the foundation of education in the country, the emphasis on cultivating social and emotional competence among adolescents is far from enough.

In China, promoting comprehensive human development is an essential part of the education policy. As we navigate the complexities of the modern era, the vision outlined in "China's Educational Modernization 2035" is a fundamental shift toward prioritizing comprehensive development.

It is imperative to nurture successive generations of individuals that excel not only in cognitive abilities but also in non-cognitive skills. Social and emotional competence, often referred to as soft skills, play a pivotal role in the comprehensive development of human beings. They encompass vital aspects such as achievement of goals, interpersonal cooperation and emotional management, contributing to children's character building, critical thinking, cooperative ability and innovative capacity.

However, despite the vital importance of social and emotional competence, there exists a glaring gap in the education landscape. The prevailing emphasis on cognitive ability and exam scores has overshadowed the importance of nurturing these essential non-cognitive skills among adolescents. The lack of emphasis on cultivating social and emotional competence among adolescents is further exacerbated by the absence of a top-level, targeted policy and institutional framework to systematically integrate social and emotional competence into the education system.

Moreover, as we try to overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities created by the rise of artificial intelligence, the need to prioritize the cultivation of social and emotional competence among adolescents becomes even more pronounced. In an era where knowledge and skills are rapidly evolving, social and emotional competence has emerged

Moving forward, several key recommendations can prompt us to prioritize the cultivation of social and emotional competence among adolescents.

as an element of foundational competency essential for navigating an increasingly complex world. The global shift toward an "affective turn" in educational reform underscores the growing recognition of the pivotal role played by social and emotional competence in shaping the future of education.

Despite the global trends of technology revolution such as AI breakthroughs, Chinese educators should do much more in both research and practice related to the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence among adolescents. From an international perspective, over the past 20 years, the "pivot to emotion" has increasingly become the direction of global education reform. International organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),

the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, as well as countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany and Japan, have vigorously promoted the development of social and emotional skills in both policy and practice.

While international initiatives such as the "Survey on Social and Emotional Skills" of the OECD have gained traction, domestic efforts remain in the nascent stages. There is an urgent need therefore to make concerted efforts to bridge this gap and leverage China's expertise and advantages in this field to improve the education system.

Moving forward, several key recommendations can prompt us to prioritize the cultivation of social and emotional competence among adolescents. First, we must strengthen research and policy development in this area, treating it as a national priority and integrating it into education policy planning at all levels.

Second, schools must play a key role as the primary venue for cultivating social and emotional competence among adolescents. By initiating pilot programs and collaborative networks, schools can serve as incubators for innovative approaches to social and

emotional learning.

And third, we must empower teachers to cultivate social and emotional competence among adolescents, by incorporating relevant training into pre-service and in-service training programs for teachers.

In conclusion, prioritizing the cultivation of social and emotional competence among adolescents is not just a matter of educational reform; it is a strategic imperative for building a better future. By recognizing the importance of these essential skills and taking targeted measures, we can ensure that the education system equips students with the tools they need to thrive in a fast-changing world.

It is time to adopt a holistic approach to education — one that fosters not only academic excellence but also emotional resilience, social competence and a sense of purpose among children. Only by doing so can we better unlock the full potential of the country's youths and build a brighter future for the next generations.

The author is Party secretary of East China Normal University. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

He Yun

Meeting highlights need to reinvigorate WTO

The 13th World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference that trade ministers from across the world attended in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, from Monday to Thursday will have profound implications on overcoming global crises and reinvigorating faith in multilateral solutions.

The need to overcome common global challenges has become even more urgent given the lackluster global economic recovery. The global growth rate for 2024 is widely estimated to be 3.1 percent, with the figure for 2025 estimated to be 3.2 percent. The estimated growth rates for both years, however, are lower than the average of 3.8 percent for the 2000-19 period.

In fact, geopolitical tensions and the stalling of trade negotiations are partly to blame for the global economy's underperformance.

Trade negotiations held under the WTO framework are meant to progressively reduce barriers to trade and market access, and increase opportunities for countries to benefit from more efficient production chains and cheaper imports. Trade negotiations, if successful, can create policy certainty and transparency, and boost cross-border commerce and investment.

But the Doha Round of multilateral talks, initiated in 2001, have been stalled for years. At the same time, the share and scope of regional trade

The WTO does need reforms, but it is important to preserve the development rights of emerging economies and developing countries.

agreements beyond the WTO framework have peaked. And this negotiation paralysis has affected the global economy.

The lack of progress in the WTO talks has increased the uncertainties of exporters and investors, prompting them to defer key decisions.

The negotiation stalemate has sapped enterprise confidence in global cooperation, affecting their decisions to strike mega trade deals, and further reducing engagements among global markets. Also, without the smooth functioning of the WTO, unilateralism has been rising as major powers impose tit-for-tat tariffs or weaponize trade tools to fulfill their economic and political interests.

If major economies continue to build trade barriers against each other, the global economy could split into separate, hostile economic blocs. And the overall impact of trade protectionism on the global economy could potentially drag down global GDP by up to 1.1 percent. In sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture, the impact could

be specially damaging.

More worrying is the increasing weaponization of trade by some developed economies to achieve their narrow political rather than economic ends, severely undermining core WTO principles such as non-discrimination. For example, the United States has restricted the export of semiconductors to China on the pretext of safeguarding its "national security", setting a dangerous precedent.

If left unchecked, these troubling trends will accelerate, fragmenting the global economy into rival spheres of influence. Resuming the Doha Round of talks and reviving the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism by appointing the required number of judges, which the US has blocked, are vital to restoring the international community's faith in the WTO.

The dispute settlement mechanism hears the appeals of WTO member states in trade dispute cases. With the mechanism paralyzed, disputes between WTO members have intensified, leading to avoidable confrontations, and major economies have been flouting rules they don't like and taking unilateral trade actions.

If such violations go unchecked, it would further undermine the credibility of the WTO and make it even more difficult to enforce common trade rules. This will lead to intensifying tit-for-tat reprisals, pushing the world toward more trade wars.

The WTO does need reforms, but it is

important to preserve the development rights of emerging economies and developing countries. The principle of special and differential treatment is crucial for sharing the gains of global trade. Attempts to deprive emerging market economies such as China of the rights guaranteed to them by the WTO are deeply troubling. WTO reforms must incorporate, not isolate, economies, especially emerging economies that have been contributing the most to global growth.

As for trade policies, they should promote mutual benefit by facilitating the integration and development of both advanced and developing economies. Upholding such win-win principles is vital for shared prosperity.

With rhetoric heating up, the 13th World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference has shown the imperative of choosing cooperation over confrontation, and stability over turmoil. China has submitted reform proposals for the WTO, forged consensus on key issues, and is committed to further opening up its economy and continuing to provide global public goods. It's time other WTO members summoned the political courage to explore pragmatic solutions to the economic problems, and worked together to reinvigorate the WTO.

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Chen Weihua

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Lack of EU interest in finding Nord Stream saboteur raises serious questions

The explosions in September 2022 that crippled the Nord Stream pipelines, which used to supply natural gas to Germany and some other European countries through the Baltic Sea, were a deliberate attack on Germany's and the European Union's critical infrastructure. Many regard it as an act of war.

But the EU's lack of courage to identify the culprit, despite Sweden, Denmark and Germany conducting separate probes, is not only shocking, it has also fueled wild speculation that a country deemed friendly to Germany was involved in the sabotage. Sweden closed its investigation earlier in February, and Denmark announced on Monday that it, too, had closed its probe, further fueling such speculation.

The Danish authorities said on Monday that the explosions were an act of sabotage but there were not enough grounds for a criminal case, while Swedish officials said the case did not fall under its jurisdiction and that they had handed over to Germany "materials that can be used as evidence in the German investigation".

This leaves Germany, whose economy has been hit hard by the Nord Stream sabotage and the resulting drying up of Russian natural gas supply, to name the culprit. But whether it will do so is anybody's guess.

None of the three countries has so far revealed much detail of their 16-month investigations, something unusual given the devastating nature of the attacks and their impact on the European public.

Some people in the US and the EU had pointed fingers at Russia after the blasts, but it made little sense to most people that Russia would damage its own gas pipelines and deal a blow to its economy.

EU and German leaders hardly talk about the explosions anymore, which is strange because Germany and some other European countries were forced to buy natural gas from the United States at higher costs. Their silence is deafening given their usually strident response to the slightest assault on the EU or any of its members from a country that is not a US ally.

At the European Commission midday briefing this week after Denmark announced the closure of its probe, I was surprisingly the only one wanting to question the closing down of the probe. No reporter from any EU member state bothered to question Denmark's decision to "shut the case".

The European Commission spokesperson kept repeating the same answer that investigations into the explosions fall under the jurisdiction of EU member states, as if the commission had nothing to do with the EU.

Some people in the US and the EU had pointed fingers at Russia after the blasts, but it made little sense to most people that Russia would damage its own gas pipelines and deal a blow to its economy.

Russia actually called for an independent international inquiry into the explosions, a request rejected by the US and its allies in the United Nations Security Council. Perhaps that's why Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the Danish decision "close to absurdity", accusing the Danish government of closing the case to cover up for its allies.

It is no secret that the US has for long been against the construction of Nord Stream pipelines. It even threatened sanctions against German companies and ports involved in the construction of the project.

In fact, US President Joe Biden said on Feb 7, 2022, less than three weeks before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, that Washington would "bring an end" to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline if Russia goes ahead with its "special military operations". "I promise you, we will be able to do it," he told reporters, without elaborating.

In February last year, award-winning investigative reporter Seymour Hersh published an article based on information provided by a person who didn't want to be named, arguing that the Biden administration and the CIA were responsible for blowing up the pipelines.

Shortly afterwards, an investigation by German media outlets ARD, SWR and Die Zeit revealed that a pro-Ukrainian group was responsible for the explosions, while a report in The New York Times, based on a review of intelligence by US officials, pointed to the same conclusion.

While the investigations of Sweden and Denmark, according to the two countries, didn't yield any conclusive evidence, the EU's unusual silence over the issue suggests there is an inconvenient truth behind the EU facade.

GLOBAL VIEWS



Editor's note: The world has undergone many changes and shocks in recent years. Enhanced dialogue between scholars from China and overseas is needed to build mutual understanding on many problems the world faces. For this purpose, the China Watch Institute of China Daily and the National Institute for Global Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, jointly present this special column: The Global Strategy Dialogue, in which experts from China and abroad will offer insightful views, analysis and fresh perspectives on long-term strategic issues of global importance.

GONG XIAOFEI AND YUAN ZHENG

To its own back yard

China should take steps to minimize the negative impacts of Washington's efforts to bring manufacturing back to the US

After the 2008 financial crisis, the political elites in the United States came to realize the importance of manufacturing. From the re-industrialization strategy of the Barack Obama administration to the Donald Trump administration's initiative to "bring manufacturing back to the US", and now the Joe Biden administration's plan to revive US manufacturing, the nation has been pushing for the resurrection of domestic manufacturing by offering incentives to homemade products, toughening "Buy American" rules, improving the ecosystem for industrial innovation and adopting protectionist measures.



Gong Xiaofei



Yuan Zheng

Through these efforts, some progress has been made in the endeavor to bring manufacturing back to the US, but the target has not been fully achieved.

First, despite a made-in-the-US rebound, its manufacturing industry remains "hollowed out". The added value of US manufacturing grew from \$1.7 trillion in 2009 to \$2.79 trillion in 2022, and the spending on construction has surged. However, the value added by US manufacturing as a percentage of GDP has been decreasing to the lowest level since the financial crisis. The real economy remains weak compared with the virtual economy with the added value of manufacturing lower than the financial and services industries.

Second, the increased manufacturing jobs have not rebuilt the country's middle class. Data released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the number of workers employed in manufacturing grew from 11.59 million in 2009 to 13.53 million in 2022, with the unemployment rate dropping from 10 percent to 3.5 percent. However, the share of US aggregate income earned by the middle class shrank from 45 percent in 2011 to 42 percent in 2020. The numbers prove that "bringing manufacturing back to the US" policy has not addressed the income inequality of the country, and failed to raise the share of earnings of the middle class.

Third, "bringing manufacturing

back to the US" has strengthened the resilience of US supply chains, but has not changed its dependence on China. Since measures to revive manufacturing were put in place, made-in-the-US products have hit a record high, with less foreign goods imported. Meanwhile, the sources of US imports have become more diversified, with more goods that used to be bought from China now coming from Mexico, Canada or Vietnam. That being said, the US' reliance on China remains strong: most of the goods the US now imports from Mexico, Canada and Vietnam have upstream trade and investment ties to China.

That the "bringing manufacturing back to the US" strategy has failed to reach the desired target can be attributed to three reasons.

First, the two parties' divergence on the approach to revitalizing manufacturing has had an adverse impact on policy implementation. While the Democrats prefer bigger government and advocate boosting domestic manufacturing through increasing public investment and government subsidies, the Republicans want smaller government and seek to lure manufacturing companies back and reduce the costs of made-in-the-US by lowering taxes and raising tariffs.

Since the Republican Party regained control of the House of Representatives in the 2022 mid-term elections and the 2024 presidential election is right around the corner, the Biden administration's manufacturing initiatives will face stiff opposition from the Republicans. Donald Trump, the leading Republican presidential candidate, has vowed to repeal the electric vehicle tax credits enacted in the Inflation Reduction Act on his first day in office if he is elected, which would surely hurt the development of the nation's electric vehicle industry.

Second, the US is plagued by a shortage of workers. According to data by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the private sector had a deficit of 8.01 million workers at the end of December, 2023, with 601,000 manufacturing jobs unfilled. After the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act came into effect, the US has witnessed an increasing shortage in clean energy and semiconductor wafer factories, with 1.4 million positions estimated to be vacant by 2030. The lack of interest in blue-collar jobs among the younger generation is complicat-

ing the hiring difficulties in the manufacturing sector in the long term.

Third, due to the higher costs of labor and land in the US, many manufacturing companies that moved out of China didn't return to the US, but instead relocated to other low-cost countries in Asia or Mexico. Moreover, poor infrastructure, unstable supplies of materials and components, and an incomplete network of upstream and downstream suppliers have dampened the enthusiasm of manufacturers to go back to the US.

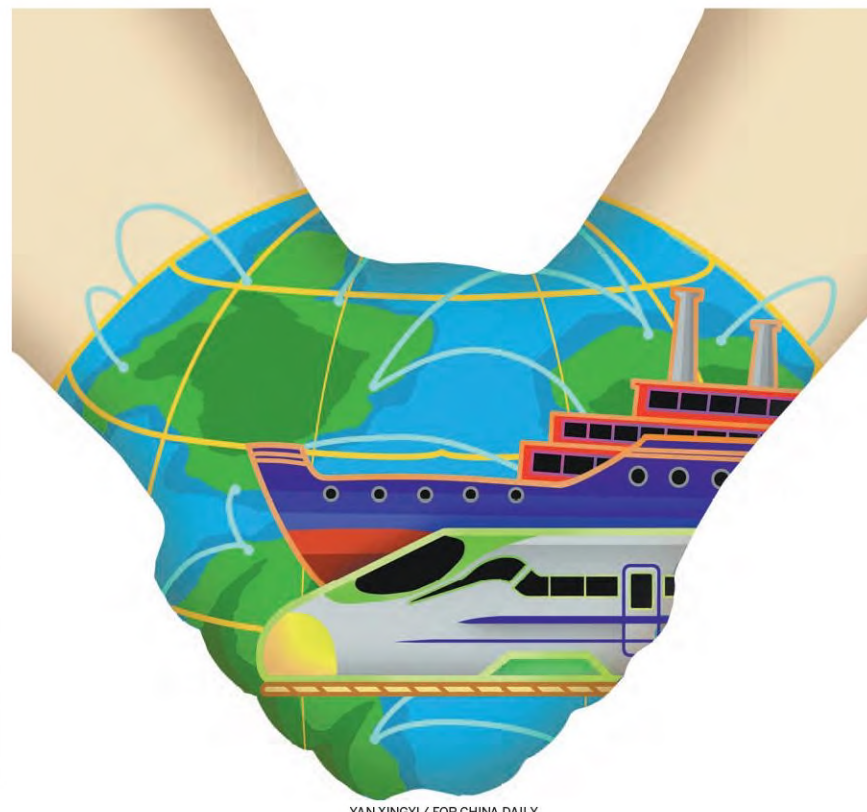
As the policy to bring manufacturing back to the US threatens the status of China as the world's largest manufacturing power, and makes it harder for it to access leading technologies through cooperation, China should take steps to minimize the policy's negative impacts.

First, China needs to capitalize on its huge domestic market, relatively high productivity, complete manufacturing system, sound supply chain infrastructure, and an ever-improving business environment to increase its appeal to foreign capital.

Second, China should keep to the right direction of globalization, deeply participate in the global industrial division of labor and cooperation, and strengthen cooperation in industrial chains and supply chains with third parties. It is imperative for the country to safeguard the diverse and stable international economic landscape to mitigate the negative impacts of "bringing manufacturing back to the US" and prevent the supply chains from being severed.

Last but not least, China should double down on its efforts to boost independent innovation in manufacturing by promoting industry-academia-research cooperation and improving the innovation ecosystem in manufacturing. The country also needs to build research platforms of key generic technologies to elevate the manufacturing industry to the middle and higher ends and strengthen the core competitiveness of the manufacturing sector.

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YAN XINGYI / FOR CHINA DAILY

NABIL FAHMY

Fair shake

Chinese modernization can serve as a catalyst for the developing world to pursue the common good

A common thinking of China and other developing countries is the need to achieve a more equitable world order, be that between independent sovereign states after the era of European colonialism, or in terms of sharing and benefiting from development processes, given that much of the natural and human resources in the developing world have served as a catalyst and engine for the development of the Industrial West.

Most of the developing countries were also members of the Nonaligned Movement during the Cold War, avoiding taking sides in the contest between the North Atlantic bloc led by the United States and the East European bloc led by the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War, these two fundamental parameters of the developing world's aspirations were in many ways also consistent with the prevailing priority interests of China, which also wanted to gain a commensurate role to that of the major powers in world affairs, exemplified by its recognition as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Furthermore, it rationally understood as well as legitimately and proactively pursued domestic economic development for the benefit of its people.

An important corollary effect of these dual common aspirations was that both China and other developing countries became strong proponents of multilateralism and the UN system in particular, at a time when the Western countries increasingly found multilateralism in world affairs more cumbersome, equivocal and less responsive to their interests.

With the end of the Cold War, a proliferation of thematic like-minded groups were created outside the larger multilateral framework. They were initially based on socioeconomic cooperation and coordination, but ultimately expanded in scope toward political consultation, albeit witnessing important fluctuations depending on relations and tensions between the US and Russia. The G7, a group initially bringing together the strongest industrial economies, is one example.

Driven by pragmatic interests, a number of developing countries and China, joined some of these groupings or established others as a way to gain more leverage in

China and other developing countries from the Global South will set their respective development and security priorities and choose national pathways. The common embracing of cooperation, dialogue and respect for civilizations and nature will always be greatly beneficial to the world at large.

world affairs. This trend intensified as the US and other Western countries became increasingly anxious about Russia, notably in light of the present Ukraine crisis, as well as toward the increasing prominence of China on the world scene. A salient example of this is BRICS, which has just recently expanded with the addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. More than 40 countries have expressed their interest in joining the group.

The West frequently raises cautionary flags about extensive cooperation by some developing countries with China, underlining that interests are not identical. They also raise questions about the reasons behind the affinity of these developing countries and China. The strategic and fundamental affinity is that China and many developing countries want change toward a more representative, responsive, equitable and inclusive world order. As such, they are committed to making cooperative efforts to realize this objective.

There are several other reasons for the perceived increasing affinity as well. Often, the degree of development assistance and financial support provided by China to other developing countries is suggested as the cardinal motivation. Economic assistance and support is of course a factor, especially for countries with urgent needs or pursuing substantial development programs. Developing countries will naturally be inclined to accept the assistance that is more beneficial to them in size or terms.

Also important are the parameters presented by China for inter-

national relations, with the stated objective of building a community with a shared future for humankind, a goal that would fundamentally help in realizing the developing world's aspirations for a reformed world order that is more responsive to its interests.

The Belt and Road Initiative is the most prominent manifestation of efforts to realize this goal as it creates a global cooperative for the boosting of infrastructure connectivity. It is aligned with regional and multilateral development initiatives, with over 150 countries having subscribed to it, and participants investing over \$380 billion, although the majority has come from China.

The Global Development Initiative also builds on multilateral programs and aims to expedite implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly greener and more balanced global development among and within countries.

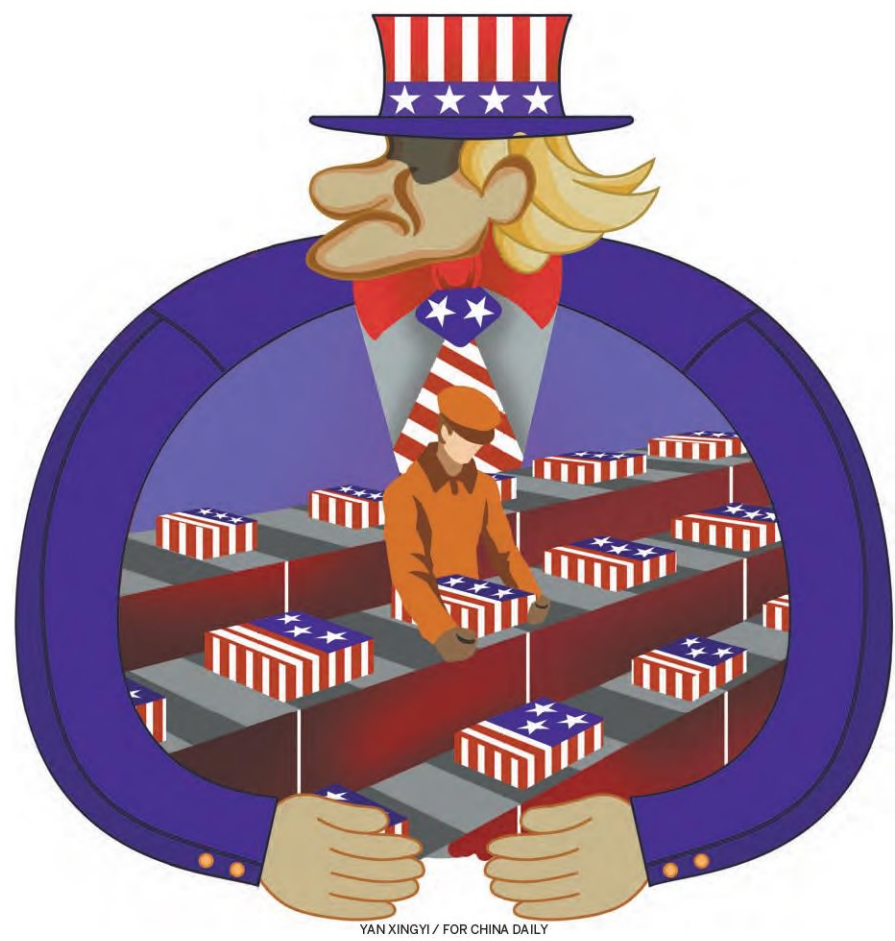
The Global Security Initiative, which emphasizes international partnership, cooperation, and dialogue, highlights the importance of respecting sovereignty of nations, the UN Charter and resolving conflicts through dialogue.

The Global Civilization Initiative underlines the importance of respect for diversity of civilizations. In other words, using our complimentary diversity for the common good because ultimately mankind has a common future which remains in our hands to define.

These four initiatives are essentially looking toward and reaching out to the international community. Many of their framing principles are also significant for Chinese modernization which are expected to enhance the prospects for a better future globally.

China and other developing countries from the Global South will set their respective development and security priorities and choose national pathways. The common embracing of cooperation, dialogue and respect for civilizations and nature will always be greatly beneficial to the world at large.

The author is former foreign minister of Egypt and a senior visiting research fellow at the Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding, Peking University. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



YAN XINGYI / FOR CHINA DAILY

LIFE

FROM THE FRONTLINE

In Jiangshi village in Xiaojiafang town, Xie Kelong was busy preparing the bamboo needed to make the village's distinctive dry dragon boat ahead of the Lantern Festival.

"We have to use best quality Moso bamboo and start preparing a month before the festival," says Xie, who used to be director of the cultural station in the town located to the southwest of Shaowu, a county-level city in the north of Fujian province.

The boats are known as "dry" because they are not made to enter the water but rather to play an important cultural role.

Now in his 70s, Xie used to scour streets, alleys and mountains in search of intangible cultural heritage materials, especially for the historical records and techniques for the dragon-boat making.

Over the past four decades, he has refined the craft, which originated some 600 years ago in the early Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) period.

During the early hours of the Lantern Festival, the 15th day of the first lunar month (which fell on Saturday this year), about 60 to 70 villagers gather to burn the midnight oil at the local ancestral hall to finish the making of the giant boat, which is about 6 to 8 meters in length and 3 to 4 meters in height, in one go.

"This involves paper-cutting, bamboo molding and assembly," Xie explains.

"The boat comes out magnificently, and its shape and features are distinctive of the north of Fujian province."

Once it is finished, the boat greets visitors at the break of dawn and is then carried door to door, in a symbolic gesture of spreading blessings, before being burned that night to signify the sending of the dragon back to the heavens.

About 3,000 to 4,000 visitors from neighboring villages come to enjoy the auspicious moment.

This year, many young people have signed up to learn to make one of the boats with Xie.

Although he has been retired for over 10 years, he has never missed the boat-making ritual and says he enjoys seeing the tradition celebrated.

When people ask him why he doesn't just take it easy, Xie will clench his fist as if to show his muscle. "As long as I can move my hands, I will keep the traditions of our ancestors," he says.

In downtown Shaowu, about 46 kilometers away, a series of celebratory cultural and folk art events helped liven up this year's Spring Festival.

He Mingling was particularly impressed by the dragon dances at the city's fountain plaza, a major public venue, on the first night of the Chinese New Year, where dragons of various colors and sizes danced to upbeat music on an open-air stage against the backdrop of crackling fireworks that lit up the night.

A large crowd of about 3,000 visitors laid siege to the space before the stage and were enthusiastic in their applause as each of the seven dragon dance teams finished.

"They all delivered high-level performances, considering that they had no prior experience," says He, who was in charge of



Villagers work on the body of the dry dragon boat, a local intangible cultural heritage in Xiaojiafang town, Shaowu city, Fujian province.

ZHANG ZHISHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

'Dry boat' helps keep tradition afloat

Unique celebration, rooted in history, highlights village's enthusiasm for the holiday, **Yang Feiyue** reports.



From left: Tourists flock to Heping ancient town in Shaowu, Fujian province, on the first day of Spring Festival.



A bird's-eye view of a sand sculpture event in Longdou village, Shaowu, during the festival.

WANG DONGBIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

"We don't impose specific requirements on the quality of a performance. The main focus is on entertainment, celebration, harmony and liveliness, and everyone taking part."

Tian Fang, deputy director of the Shaowu publicity department, Fujian province

arranging the show. She says she was amazed by some of the stunts, such as the elaborate swaying of the dragon's body and the complex dance formations. "Their enthusiasm and excitement were evident in their execu-

tion of every move and facial expressions," she says. "The rain had only stopped a day before the first public performance, but all performers did very well, despite the ground still being wet." The heads of some of the dragons

weighed more than 15 kilograms, and other dragons were up to 75 meters in length. "It was admirable. All the performers, from young people to retired women, were clearly trying to show their own style and con-

tribute to the festive atmosphere," He continues. The 20 troupes were made up of civilians from across the city, and they took turns to perform for the public during the two-week festival before competing against one

another for the top six prizes in an event that traditionally marks the end of Chinese New Year celebrations.

"Other performances, such as the Nuo dance to dispel ghosts and invite blessings, and the flower drum opera, were also put on," He says.

He works at the local folk customs and culture research center, which is part of the Shaowu culture, sports and tourism bureau. It was in charge of setting up the stage and organizing events, and so her Spring Festival was busier than normal this year, as she visited every nook and cranny in Shaowu to ensure that all the folk performances and celebrations went off smoothly.

Local authorities organized a 15-day celebration for the public this year, as opposed to seven days in previous years, says Tian Fang, deputy director of the Shaowu publicity department.

"We prepared a variety of events for each day, from art performances and riddle games to park parades," Tian says.

The government encouraged enthusiasts to perform the dragon dance to welcome in the Year of the Dragon.

"The idea was to have them dance on main streets," Tian says, adding that staff from museums, educational institutions, youth league and retiree organizations were all responsive to the call to deliver performances.

"Some villages and towns have a tradition of dragon dance performances over the years, so they were able to put on good shows after just a few rehearsals," she says.

The city receives many local returnees, who are now either studying or working in big cities elsewhere, during major holidays and especially during Spring Festival.

They showed their interest in art and cultural experiences by going out to watch the holiday performances, Tian says.

Shaowu authorities worked hard to create a festive atmosphere for returnees.

"We don't impose specific requirements on the quality of a performance. The main focus is on entertainment, celebration, harmony and liveliness, and everyone taking part," Tian says.

"As long as you have some talent and you want to perform, you're welcome on our stage."

Over the past three decades, He has been involved in Spring Festival celebration planning, which means less time to spend with her family.

"They have been very understanding. For me, getting involved in holiday work comes from my passion for art, and the positive public response has been really rewarding," she says.

She adds that her colleagues feel the same way, and have always immediately rushed to the spot to deal with emergencies.

"I feel the government is ensuring that the people celebrate the Chinese New Year holiday with lively activities," He says.

"There's also growing cultural demand; every venue was bustling, proving the public's enthusiasm," she adds.

Contact the writer at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn

What's on

Visual feast

Around 500 pieces of art and craft from the collections of several major museums are now on show at *Beauty in the Gathering*, an exhibition running through to April 1 at Beijing's National Art Museum of China. Featured categories include Chinese painting and calligraphy, oils, watercolors, prints, lacquer, sculpture and folk handicrafts.

The exhibition provides a glimpse of the great variety of art collected by top public museums around the country, and distinctive features that vary from region to region. The China Art Museum in Shanghai, for example, is presenting selected work by the ink artists who sought to make Chinese painting address social change that are representative of the openness and diversity of the Shanghai School, which dates back to the beginning of modernization in China. The School later expanded to encompass other styles of art depicting Shanghai's unique cultural landscape. Among the pieces from the Shaanxi



Province Art Museum are vivid paper-cuts by Ku Shulan, a rural woman who left a legacy of imagination, vibrancy and energy. Displays from the Hubei Museum of Art, in Wuhan, Hubei province, demonstrate the province's rich tradition of lacquer work, which dates back centuries, as evidenced by artifacts found during archaeological excavations. 9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 1 Wusi Dajie, Dongcheng district, Beijing. 010-6400-1476.

Colorful attire

Items of clothing from different eras, especially outfits worn by the upper classes, represent the economic development of the particular time, as well as its people's aesthetic views. The best examples of historical Chinese clothing have been recorded in famous paintings such as *Ladies Wearing Flowers in Their Hair* by Tang Dynasty (618-907) artist Zhou Fang, whose portrayals of female figures and their garments reveal the extravagance of the time. *Chinese Clothing, Color-*

ful Clay, now on at the Chinese Traditional Culture Museum, is a lively three-dimensional presentation of the court ladies of Zhou's work. The exhibition, which runs until May 12, traces the history of clothing by using painted clay figurines to reenact iconic scenes from figurative paintings such as Zhou's. The figurines are the work of artists from Tianjin Clay Figurine Zhang, a time-honored handicraft brand. Inspiration for other clay figures on show came from classic paintings such as the 10th century work, *Evening Revels of Han Xizai* by Gu Hongzhong, and the 18th century



Palace Ladies by Ding Guanpeng. 9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 16 Hujing Donghu, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-8799-1866.

Dragon motif

The arrival of the Year of the Dragon coincides with the 110th anniversary of the Summer Palace opening to the public. Among the celebrations is a show of 66 dragon-motif objects from the collection of Summer Palace at the Deheyuan or Garden of Virtue and Harmony. *Auspicious Dragon in New Year* brings together a variety of dragon patterns, as well as dragons in combination with other decorative motifs, such as dragons in clouds, circling dragons, dragons over running water, dragons surrounded by floral plants and nine dragon configurations. Objects on display include a jade seal with a dragon handle used by Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1368-1644), a calligraphic representation of the character long (dragon) by Dowager Cixi, who liked writing single-character pie-



ces to gift to her ministers. Also on show is a cloisonne revolving vase which demonstrates the sophisticated techniques of Qing imperial cloisonne, with rich patterns that convey a sense of majesty. The exhibition ends on April 7. 8:30 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 23 Gongmen Qianjie, Haidian district, Beijing. 010-6288-1144.

CHINA DAILY

LIFESHANGHAI



Iconic teahouse is a light show to cherish

Feng Jizhong's elegant bamboo pavilion reopens to public after two-year restoration, **Zhang Kun** reports.

The Helou Xuan, a bamboo house in Fangta Park in suburban Shanghai's Songjiang district, was named an outstanding example project for the protection of architectural heritage in Shanghai in 2023 by the municipal authorities of cultural relics protection.

The thatch-roofed pavilion supported on bamboo pillars was built in 1986. The 510-square-meter structure is 7 meters high, 16.8 meters long and 14.5 meters wide, and its high arched roof was inspired by traditional rural residences in the Yangtze River Delta.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1999, it was awarded a bronze prize for outstanding architecture design in Shanghai by the municipal government and was recognized as an important landmark of modern Chinese architectural design.

After undergoing a major, two-year restoration project, it reopened to the public a few months ago.

This is the first major restoration of the pavilion, an international award-winning structure designed by Feng Jizhong (1915-2009), a noted scholar of architecture.

Feng is recognized as one of the founding fathers of modern architecture, urban planning and landscape design in China. He was also a founding member of the architecture department at Shanghai's Tongji University, and the first Chinese scholar to become a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

Feng included the Helou Xuan tea house in a new park he was invited to design around an ancient pagoda in Songjiang district in the late 1970s.

Fangta, or the Square Pagoda, is a nine-level tower that was built as part of a Buddhist temple in the 11th century. The temple was later destroyed but the pagoda survived. Over the centuries, it underwent multiple restorations, with the latest taking place between 1974 and 1977.

A fine example of ancient Yangtze River Delta Buddhist pagodas, it has managed to preserve most of its original wood structure, and was listed in 1996 as a national treasure and is known as representative of the cultural essence of the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

In his design for the park, Feng sought to preserve the spirit of Song



Top and above: Helou Xuan is a bamboo teahouse located in Shanghai's Songjiang district. Designed by Feng Jizhong it underwent a two-year restoration by Feng's student Huang Yiru. The legendary building recently reopened to the public. PHOTOS BY GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY

Dynasty culture and create an outdoor museum as a park, according to his daughter, Feng Ye.

According to Wang Shu, China's first Pritzker prize winner (architecture's Nobel), Feng Jizhong's approach also reflected the influence of modern architecture. Wang believes the design and planning of Fangta Park is second to none in China and praises the design of the park and the Helou Xuan teahouse as masterpieces that represent the essence of Chinese aesthetics and philosophy.

Fangta is around 12 hectares in size. Aside from the ancient pagoda, it is also home to a series of important cultural remains, including a brick screen wall built in 1370, which is one of the finest and best preserved tiled walls in China, and which features a monster with antlers like a deer, a tail like a lion, scales of a fish and hoofs of an ox.

The Temple of the Queen of Heaven, the largest Mazu Temple in Shanghai, was also relocated to the park from Suzhou Creek.

Feng Jizhong took a minimalist approach to his design and connected these important sites via gateways, paths, squares and walls, allowing the elements to remain independent. Their coexistence creates a spatial balance that combines traditional Chinese garden art with modern architecture, Wang says.

The teahouse is located in a secluded corner of the park. Visitors have to walk along two brick arcades before reaching the front of the pavilion, which is a

striking sight with its thickly thatched grass roof supported on slender bamboo poles. A natural material that has been used in Chinese architecture for thousands of years, bamboo is resilient and enduring if properly protected, Wang says.

Feng Jizhong painted all the nodes, where the bamboo connects, black, and had steel bases designed for each of the pillars, like shoes for feet, to protect the natural material from excessive humidity. Although the thatch has been changed every year, the main bamboo structure has survived over 30 years.

He envisaged the bamboo aging and eventually decaying and had his disciple Huang Yiru spend six months making an accurate model, so that the pavilion could be rebuilt when necessary.

Now the deputy director of the college of architecture and urban planning at Tongji University, Huang headed the restoration project himself.

"We had three-dimensional scanning done before dismantling the structure," Huang says, "so that the imagery can be used in the future when it has to be rebuilt again."

To remain as faithful to the original design as possible, Huang managed to find 4- to 6-year-old bamboo from Anji in Zhejiang province, and sourced the thatch in Lianyungang in Jiangsu province.

He also added a new wall across the river to the south of the pavilion and says that Feng Jizhong had plans for the design of the teahouse that were not completed due to a lack of funds. "By adding this wall, the project extends to the other side of the river, and the landscape becomes complete," Huang says. "The Helou Xuan was Feng Jizhong's last project, and he considered it his best."

"Lots of elderly people spend the whole day here when the weather is fine," says Xiao He, who works in the park administration.

From inside the pavilion, people can see rays of sunlight in the morning, and shadow arches created by the wall. Anyone who enjoys a cup of tea, or a game of Chinese chess will enjoy spending time at the pavilion watching the changing light.

Contact the writer at zhangkun@chinadaily.com.cn

Brushes with rural childhood brings countryside into view

By ZHANG KUN

Golden Childhood, an illustrated book about a Shanghai folk art form, will be published by UK-based Balestier Press. With 21 paintings by Chen Huifang, a folk artist from the city's Jinshan district, the book vividly portrays idyllic scenes of rural life in China.

A Shanghai folk tradition that originated in the embroidery and stove paintings of South China, the paintings of the rural residents of Jinshan district are known for their artistic exaggeration and intense color contrasts, which capture the essence of the customs and landscapes of the southern Yangtze River Delta regions.

Born in Shanghai in 1970, Chen learned to paint from her father, Chen Fulin, who pioneered Jinshan folk painting.

During her 30-year career as a professional artist, Chen Huifang has produced more than 400 paintings, many of which have received awards at national art exhibitions and have been featured in the Chinese media. Her acclaimed piece, *Jiangnan Village* received the highest award at the Chinese Farmer Painting Excellent Works Exhibition.



From left: Jinshan folk artist Chen Huifang works on her new illustrated book *Golden Childhood*. Some of Chen's illustrations. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY.

"I'd expect to be invited to publish this book by a foreign publisher. When I showed my works in the United Kingdom, Austria and Estonia before at solo exhibitions and cultural exchange events, my folk paintings already attracted many viewers," she says.

It was a casual meeting with

author Shen Yang that led to the idea for the book.

During the Lunar New Year celebrations in 2021, Shen visited Chen Huifang's studio in Jinshan for the first time. Captivated by the scenes depicted in the paintings, she decided to collaborate with Chen Huifang to convey personal stories through

illustrations.

Golden Childhood is about the whimsical childhood world of the book's main character Yangyang, where animals and water are supporting characters too.

The illustrations depict the games popular with children in the Chinese countryside, such as sliding

down haystacks, riding straw horses, and making grape popsicles. Festive New Year scenes, including dragon and lion dances and bustling market gatherings, are also beautifully illustrated.

This book celebrates the simple pleasures of life, the joys of playing freely outdoors and enjoying nature,

and is sprinkled with interesting nuggets of Chinese culture and the old ways of living.

It took more than a year for *Golden Childhood* to be released to foreign readers. The book was published last year. "I can't believe there are such beautiful paintings," stated an editor with the publishing company.

Founded in 2015, Balestier Press is an independent publisher dedicated to presenting the hidden gems of contemporary world literature, including picture books, graphic novels and memoirs, and has a particular focus on Asia and the Pacific.

The book not only exquisitely captures rural life, but serves as a cultural ambassador, a showcase of China's historical richness, the critics say. Chen Huifang says its publication has boosted her confidence and will inform future efforts to present Chinese culture to foreign readers.

"I believe it is the enduring vitality of China's outstanding traditional culture that captivates and endears foreign readers," the illustrator says.

Lin Jinyi contributed to this story.

LIFE



If Zou Shiming's winning of multiple world and Olympic boxing championships is seen as a milestone in Chinese boxing history, the recent film *Re La Gun Tang* — which also goes by the English title *YOLO* — about an overweight woman rebuilding her confidence through boxing, can be seen as another, and is set to boost the development of the sport in China, according to Wang Dexin, a boxing professor at the Shanghai University of Sport.

A boxing instructor for over 30 years and Zou's former mentor, Wang served as the technical director of boxing for *YOLO*, an acronym for "you only live once", which dominated China's box office during the Spring Festival holiday, and which has so far grossed more than 3 billion yuan (\$420 million).

During filming, lead actress, Jia Ling, who also directed the movie, lost 50 kilograms playing the protagonist Du Leying.

The film's popularity and Jia's success have ignited a fervor for the sport of boxing among moviegoers that has transcended theaters.

Data from e-commerce platform Meituan shows that online searches related to "boxing" increased 388.4 percent year-on-year in the week following the movie's premiere on Feb 10, and the consumer review platform Dianping saw a 337.53 percent increase in related comments.

Keyword searches, such as "adult boxing", "trial boxing class", and "female boxing" have seen a tenfold year-on-year increase. Shanghai ranks highest in search volume, the data shows.

Wang is also an instructor for referees accredited by the International Boxing Federation and a member of the Asian Boxing Confederation's Referees and Judges Commission. Committed to promoting boxing throughout his career, he is gratified by the positive response to the film.

"The influence of *YOLO* has achieved levels of promotion and popularization of boxing rarely seen in the past few decades, and I think it will be difficult to surpass in the

short term," says Wang.

While boxing dates back to ancient times and is considered one of the oldest forms of martial arts in the world, China is a latecomer to the development of modern boxing, Wang says.

As it is known now, boxing began in the early 1800s when James Figg (1695-1734) won the first British boxing championship in 1719. In 1867, British boxing champion John Sholto Douglas (1844-1900) compiled a set of regulations that prohibited kicking, headbutting, biting, and wrestling, as well as introducing the rule that athletes must stand up within 10 seconds of being knocked down. These rules were recognized worldwide in 1891 and promoted boxing to a codified sport.

At the end of the 19th century, boxing became popular in America and Europe. The establishment of associations, such as the Amateur Boxing Association and the World Boxing Council, promoted the development of the sport.

"China resumed boxing in 1986 after the sport was suspended in the 1950s due to issues, such as inadequate medical support," Wang says.

After the national boxing team was established in Beijing in 1988, Bai Chongguang claimed the gold medal at the 11th Asian Games, delivering the country's first gold medal at an intercontinental boxing competition.

In 2004, Zou claimed China's first Olympic boxing medal. He continued to win the gold medal at the world championships in 2005, becoming the first Chinese boxer to stand on the highest podium, and then won China's first Olympic boxing gold medal in 2008, and successfully defended his title at the London Olympics four years later.

Thanks to Zou's success, boxing clubs mushroomed in cities across the country.

"At the time, Shanghai opened many boxing gyms and many people were also attracted to boxing, inspired by Zou's success," says Sun Min, a boxing coach in charge of Xiaolong Boxing Gym in Shanghai.

Movie gets theatergoers all gloved up

Recent box-office hit *YOLO* fuels a national surge in popularity for the sport of boxing, **He Qi** reports in Shanghai.



Above: Wang Dexin, the boxing director for the movie *YOLO*, uses a tennis ball to practice boxing. Top left: Wang instructs Zhu Tianfu, who plays a boxing coach in the film. Top right: Wang makes a cameo appearance as a referee in the film. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



"Boxing was a hot topic at the time," he adds. Sun was previously a professional boxer and has been working in the boxing sector for over two decades.

But the fervor for boxing gradually waned, he says, and boxing entered a relatively slow period.

Stereotypes about boxing might be one of the reasons.

"In the past, people's impressions of boxing were of violence, cruelty and blood, but, in fact, it is a sport requiring a range of abilities, combining speed, strength, coordination and flexibility," Wang says.

"Boxing is not something that you merely practice for fitness gains. It requires mindfulness more than anything else, especially in the ring. It is a sport that combines willpower, intellect and physical strength," says Wang, who also made a cameo appearance as a referee in the film. "A good boxer needs to have courage, and technical and tactical abilities to compete with an opponent."

Even as a professional, Wang used to have misunderstandings about the sport.

"When I first got into boxing, I thought it was a sport for strong men," Wang says. But, when women's boxing was included in the 2012 London Olympics, and he saw a greater number of women participating in boxing, he realized it is actually a sport for the brave.

Guang Ming, head coach and director of the Xindoushi (New Fighters) boxing club in Shanghai's Jing'an district, says *YOLO* has made many people view boxing as a sport that can help them become fit.

"Indeed, more people have come to inquire about boxing classes since the film's release," Guang says. "I think it's good for the popularization of boxing."

Similarly, mixed martial arts, or MMA, has also remained a relatively niche sport in terms of participation, but is gaining increasing public attention due to the success of Zhang Weili, China's first and only UFC champion.

While Zhang has shown the world the strength and power of Chinese women, now audiences nationwide have seen Jia's transformation.

The impact of this film has given Wang more confidence in the development of boxing as a popular sport.

Sun from Xiaolong Boxing Gym agrees. With more people coming to the gym for trial classes, Sun says, "I hope to take advantage of this trend

and enable more people to experience boxing's unique appeal."

Hao Jiejing is sure of boxing's growing popularity. She herself was first introduced to another pugilistic form, Thai boxing, five years ago. He now runs Rama Muay Thai Gym in Shanghai, which employs coaches from Thailand, all with professional training.

"There are already many Muay Thai gyms in Shanghai, and most of the time the coaches are fully booked," Hao says.

Since Wang started working as a boxing professor at Shanghai University of Sport in 1993, he has been dedicated to promoting boxing as a sport.

In addition to traveling to participate in the promotion and evaluation of international boxing referees, Wang gives lectures to coaches and referees in China and took part in devising the grading standards for Chinese boxers.

Wang believes boxing has bright prospects to develop in China, as it is a sport with few barriers to entry.

"Training can be conducted at home or in the office, and is not limited by the venue. So, it is suitable for practicing at any time," Wang says.

In addition, Wang has insisted on taking boxing to schools and has encouraged everyone to learn from a young age.

"Due to the need for quick and strong breathing, boxing can also enhance cardiovascular function and improve endurance. At the same time, boxing releases pressure and emotions through the act of punching sandbags," he adds. "Especially for teenagers, boxing is a sport that can improve overall physical and psychological fitness."

Wang reminds practitioners that it is important to choose a professional coach and understand that boxing also needs to be combined with physical fitness and other auxiliary exercise.

"Nonetheless, the opportunity to promote public participation in boxing has actually arrived," Wang says.

Wu Xianjie contributed to this story.

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More Chinese have the stomach to face life-changing gastric surgery

By ZHOU WENTING in Shanghai zhouwenting@chinadaily.com.cn

According to a leading doctor, more than 30,000 cases of metabolic and bariatric surgery, or MBS, which helps to reduce food consumption and aids weight loss by reducing stomach size and, in some cases, by rerouting part of the patient's digestive system, were performed in China last year.

The rise in the number of patients resorting to surgery not only reflects a better understanding of these medical procedures among the public, but perhaps more importantly, highlights the country's increasing rate of obesity, says Wang Bing, a chief surgeon at Shanghai No 9 People's Hospital, which is affiliated with Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine.

His team started performing weight-loss surgeries 15 years ago, and was among the first in the country to do so. The number performed by his team has leapt from a dozen a year initially, to around 300 currently.

"We find that a large proportion of patients coming to seek medical

assistance at our department suffer from not only obesity but high blood pressure, diabetes and sleep apnea, a serious sleep disorder in which breathing stops and starts repeatedly. Obesity and its related metabolic diseases are usually cases of mutual cause and effect," says Wang.

"It's rather hard for these patients to lose weight through their own efforts by doing sports or dieting. They need to resort to external intervention to help break the body's unhealthy metabolic cycle and state of obesity," he says.

So far, MBS has proved to be the most effective treatment to sustain weight loss and, in most cases, is not prone to relapse, according to the doctor. Implementation of the minimally invasive surgery has grown considerably since its introduction in the 1990s. Approximately 100,000 of them are performed in the United States per year.

Wang says that most patients undergoing surgery will reach a healthy weight within three to six months after the operation. Their weight will keep dropping for around two years afterward.

After the surgery, we usually find changes to the secretion of gastrointestinal hormones in a patient's body, and the signals sent from the brain also change. All this helps solve metabolic problems dramatically."

Wang Bing, chief surgeon at Shanghai No 9 People's Hospital

Obesity among Asians is generally different to Caucasians, according to experts. Asians tend to experience mainly abdominal obesity, meaning that individuals usually do not have excessively thick limbs, but have quite a lot of belly fat.

"Belly fat means excessive visceral fat, which is the root cause of a variety of metabolic disorders," says Wang. "Compared with neighboring countries, such as Japan and South Korea, China has a significantly higher obesity rate."

Bariatric surgery usually trig-

gers a series of chemical reactions in the patient's body, says Wang.

"After the surgery, we usually find changes to the secretion of gastrointestinal hormones in a patient's body, and the signals sent from the brain also change. All this helps solve metabolic problems dramatically," says Wang.

According to treatment guidelines, MBS is recommended for individuals whose BMI is above 32.5, or above 27.5 if they suffer from two types of metabolic diseases.

Still, the actual number of patients seeking help only

accounts for a small proportion of those suffering from obesity, along with various other everyday physical issues, including pain in the back and knees, difficulty sleeping, and motion or mobility problems.

Wang also says that while men account for 70 percent of obese individuals, women account for 70 percent of his patients, showing that women pay more attention to their appearance.

Experts have reminded the public to pay more attention to obesity, which was listed as a disease by the World Health Organization in 1948.

The latest official national statistics in 2020 showed that weight gain and obesity affected more than half of the Chinese population, almost double the rate in 2002.

Also in 2020, the rate of overweight or obese minors aged between 6 and 17 years old, and below 6, stood at nearly 20 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

"The growth in the rate of overweight minors is a result of multiple factors, including a modern lifestyle and Westernized diets.

People also traditionally believe that slimmness is equivalent to unhealthiness to some extent," Wang says.

A 44-year-old father and his 21-year-old son, from Shanghai, underwent surgery a month ago. They have lost 20 kilograms and 15 kg respectively.

The father, surnamed Pan, says that he tried various methods, including sports and taking slimming medication, to lose weight, all to no avail.

"I used to suffer from sleep apnea, which made me suffocate and wake up often. After the surgery, I'm sleeping much better. Also, my belly fat has decreased rapidly, which has made moving around easier," he says.

As well as severe sleep apnea, he used to suffer from high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. The son used to suffer from high cholesterol, high uric acid levels and cardiac hypertrophy.

The symptoms of many of their conditions have been alleviated, and doctors will continue to monitor indicators related to their metabolic disorders.