

Ceremonial time

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CHINA DAILY

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Xi reaffirms opening-up commitment

President's visit to joint venture seen as a confidence booster for businesses

By XU WEI in Beijing and ZOU SHUO in Changsha

President Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's commitment to opening-up and developing new quality productive forces as he visited a joint venture invested in by German chemical giant BASF on Monday, a trip that is expected to buoy the confidence of businesses operating in the country.

Xi toured BASF Shanshan Battery Materials Co during a fact-finding trip in Changsha, Hunan province, the first such trip after the annual sessions of China's top legislative and political advisory bodies earlier this month.

It came as the nation's top leadership underlined new quality productive forces, characterized by high technology, high efficiency and high quality, in underpinning China's high-quality growth and reinvigorating the world's second-largest economy.

Xi introduced the term new quality productive forces during a trip to northeastern China in September.

During the two sessions, Xi stressed the need to develop new quality productive forces that are tailored to local conditions.

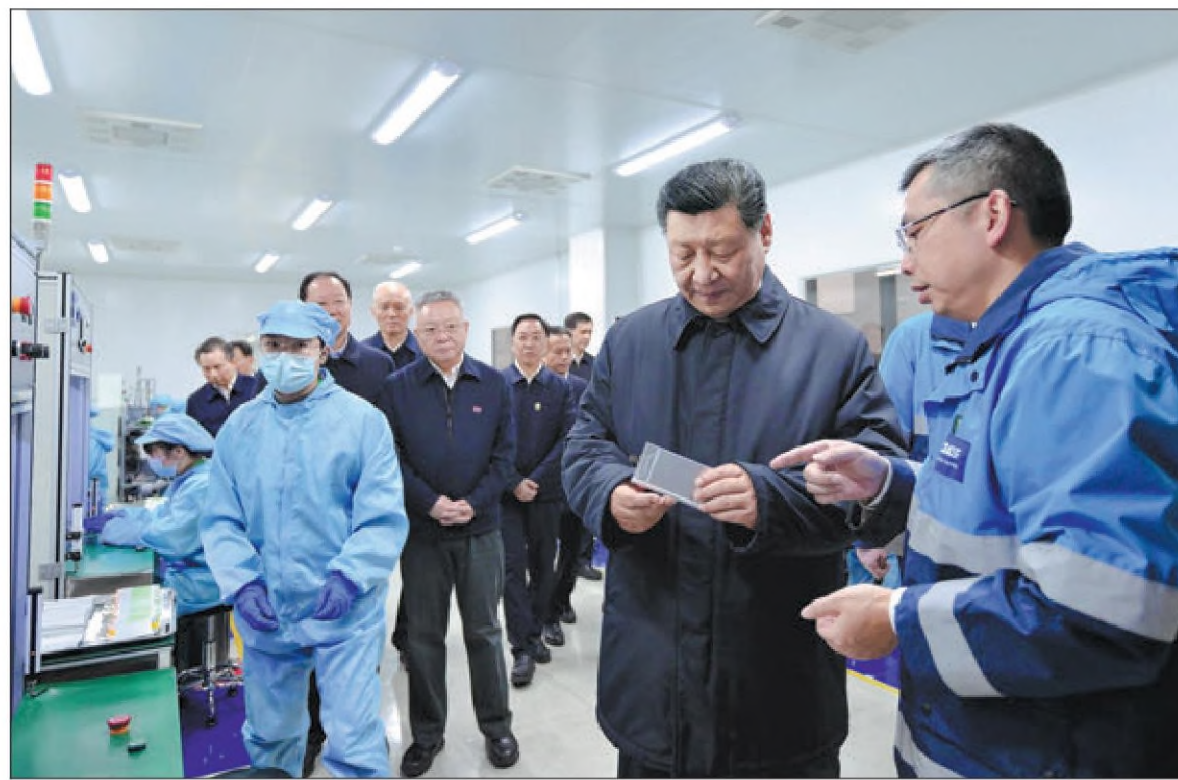
The joint venture, formed by BASF and Ningbo Shanshan Co in 2021, with BASF being the majority owner, mainly produces materials for batteries used in electric vehicles.

BASF Shanshan's executives said Xi's trip has bolstered their confidence and reinforced their resolve for innovation.

"Today was a special day for us," said Michael Baier, chairman of the board for BASF Shanshan, adding that it was inspirational to have the Chinese president visit the joint venture.

"It is great to hear that the central government supports this kind of export business," he said.

Peng Wenjie, chief technology officer of BASF Shanshan, said he could feel the keen interest and emphasis from the president over new quality productive forces during



President Xi Jinping learns on Monday about local endeavors to accelerate the development of new quality productive forces and promote high-standard opening-up at BASF Shanshan Battery Materials Co during his inspection of Changsha, Hunan province. XIE HUANCHI / XINHUA

the tour of the company's workshop and two laboratories.

Peng said the establishment of the joint venture, the largest foreign investment project in Hunan in 2021, enabled the German chemical company to become the first battery materials producer with a presence in all major global markets.

"BASF has always been optimistic about the development potential of the Chinese economy and market," Peng said, adding that the second phase of the joint venture will be put into production in June and will enable the company to double its production capacity.

Tan Xinxin, dean of the research institute of BASF Shanshan, said that President Xi's trip will inspire the company to continue bolstering its innovation drive.

"We will keep bringing in more

cutting-edge equipment and continuously enhance our ability to innovate deeply through exploration and experimentation in our scientific research," he said.

According to an announcement made by BASF in 2022, the joint venture has expanded its battery materials capacity to meet the fast-growing local and global demand in the electric vehicle industry.

The president's trip to BASF Shanshan came close to one year after he visited the Guangzhou manufacturing base of LG Display, South Korea's largest display panel maker. During the trip, he encouraged foreign investors to seize opportunities, build up their presence in China and further explore the Chinese market.

China has identified electric vehicles, lithium batteries and

photovoltaic products as its "new three" products that will drive the growth of exports.

According to official figures, the exports of China's power batteries surged 87.1 percent year-on-year in 2023, with six of the top 10 global suppliers being Chinese companies.

Luo Zuoxian, head of intelligence and research at the Sinopec Economics and Development Research Institute, said many multinational chemical corporations, including BASF, are committed to deepening their presence in China, motivated by the massive market potential and continuous endeavors to accelerate the development of new quality productive forces.

The key to advancing new quality productive forces lies in breakthroughs in technological innovation, he said.

"Cooperation for multinational corporations with local partners in the battery industry chain is not only an important innovation in business models, but also a significant manifestation of high-level openness to the world," Luo added.

Shi Jiayan, energy storage analyst of BloombergNEF, said overseas companies can benefit from the collaboration with Chinese companies by leveraging China's mature battery manufacturing technology and better commercializing their new battery technologies and products at competitive cost.

Zheng Xin in Beijing and Zhu Youfang in Changsha contributed to this story.

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HK to enact long-awaited ordinance on national security

By WU KUNLING and WILLIAM XU in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is set to enact the long-awaited Safeguarding National Security Ordinance on Saturday after its legislature passed the law on Tuesday — a historic achievement that Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said was overdue by 26 years.

The ordinance, legislated under Article 23 of the Basic Law, was introduced to prevent and punish five types of acts endangering national security in Hong Kong, including treason, theft of State secrets, and espionage.

Lee said he will sign the bill soon and publish it on Saturday, the final steps to turn it into law. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government will also report it to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, according to Article 17 of the Basic Law.

In a brief speech after the Legislative Council's voting, Lee called the bill's passage a historic moment for the city that was overdue by 26 years, eight months and nine days.

It was also a glorious mission jointly accomplished by the SAR's government, the Legislative Council and many patriotic forces in the city, Lee said, adding that these efforts drew a satisfactory conclusion to an issue that had long plagued the city.

Lee also stressed that the ordinance will ensure a safe and stable social environment in Hong Kong, which makes the city more attractive to businesses and investment.

Central government officials said on Tuesday that Hong Kong's soon-to-be-enacted national security legislation builds a new "firewall" for the

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Nation's wisdom on foreign relations shared globally

The 90-minute news conference by veteran Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the two sessions in Beijing was a master class about foreign policy in general, and China's in particular, full of thought-provoking remarks and bon mots.

At the news conference, Wang reaffirmed Beijing's stance that "China will remain a staunch force for the peace, stability and progress of the world", based on President Xi Jinping's vision of a community with a shared future for mankind.

Wang also underlined China's ongoing external policy goal of promoting international solidarity and cooperation. He also noted that in a report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2022, Xi, who is also general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, pointed out

WORLD WATCH

By Harald Bruning

that "although this is an era fraught with challenges, it is also an era brimming with hope".

Based on Xi's vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind, which has been enshrined in the preamble of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China since 2018, China "will remain firm in pursuing its independent policy of peace, and resolutely safeguard China's sovereignty and dignity", Wang told the dozens of journalists from all over the world at the news conference.

Wang also pledged that China will continue to promote win-win cooperation and "offer more solutions with Chinese wisdom to

regional hot spot and global issues, and provide more public goods in the interest of world peace and development".

With more than five millennia of recorded history, China, the world's oldest continuous civilization, has been able to collect a treasure trove of wisdom.

According to the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, wisdom is the daughter of experience. China certainly offers the world, much younger nations in particular, lots of wisdom as far as foreign relations are concerned.

"Building a community with a shared future for mankind is the core tenet of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, and it is China's solution to the question of what kind of world to build and how to build it," Wang said. He also pointed out that Xi "has stressed many times that humanity lives in the same global village and travels in

the same boat", because of which countries should "work together to protect the Earth, the only inhabitable planet for us all, and make it a better place".

Wang emphasized that the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind "goes beyond the obsolete zero-sum game mentality" and "points the right direction for humanity at a historical inflection point where accelerated transformation unseen in a century is unfolding across the world".

Zero-sum thinking in the political arena is the misguided belief that one side's gains can only be obtained at the expense of another side's losses. Much to the detriment of progress in international relations, the misconception continues to rear its ugly head here and there again and again.

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Chinese tech in Hungary



Employees work on Monday at Chinese electric carmaker NIO's plant in Biatortbagy, Hungary. The 10,000-square-meter plant, NIO's first overseas manufacturing facility, functions as the startup's European manufacturing, service and research center for electric products. ZHANG FAN / XINHUA

CRUISE SHIP INDUSTRY POISED FOR NEW GOLDEN ERA

With launch of domestic liner and return of international operators, the sector is primed for strong growth

By WANG YING in Shanghai wang.ying@chinadaily.com.cn

In-depth

Amid the global recovery in cruise ship travel, the revived Chinese market is eyeing unprecedented opportunities that are expected to usher in a

new golden era for the industry, experts said. At the end of 2019, before the

COVID-19 pandemic, China was the world's second-largest cruise ship travel market after the United States, said Zheng Weihang, executive vice-president and secretary-general of the China Cruise and Yacht Industry Association.

With Chinese and multinational

cruise companies recently resuming operations, China is confident it can return to the 2019 level within two years, and kick-start a new lucrative period for the industry starting in 2026, Zheng said.

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PAGE TWO



Left and right: The deck and the Cafe 1508 onboard *Adora Magic City*.
Below: *Adora Magic City* undergoes a trial voyage before its launch in 2024.
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



TRAVEL: CHINA BREAKS THE WAVES



From page 1

A joint guideline issued by ten government agencies, including the Ministry of Transport, aims to grow the Chinese cruise market into one of the most dynamic ones in the world, with annual passenger trips expected to reach 14 million by 2035.

Compared with the last cruise ship travel boom from 2008 to 2017, the new "golden decade" is expected to have different characteristics, including more tailor-made cruise products and joint development of the sector's industrial chain, Zheng said.

"We are going to see more diversified cruise trip options, a rising number of people devoted to the cruise industry, and a wider array of guest services on cruise ships supplied from China," he said.

Global players

On Saturday, Switzerland-headquartered MSC Cruises resumed its Chinese port operations in Shanghai. Its flagship vessel, the *MSC Bellissima*, became the first international cruise liner to sail from the Chinese mainland since the pandemic.

"This marks an important milestone in the global cruise industry's recovery," said Gianni Onorato, CEO of MSC Cruises, at a ceremony on Friday to celebrate the event.

"The restart of international cruise operations from China sends a strong signal to the world, and we are glad to experience the incredible speed of recovery here in the Chinese cruise market."

Onorato said the resumption of operations reaffirms his company's commitment to China, which remains as strong as ever.

"China continues to play an important strategic role for MSC Cruises," he said.

The 172,000-gross-tonnage *MSC Bellissima* is the largest cruise ship operating in Asia. The liner can accommodate up to 5,686 guests in 2,217 cabins. MSC Cruises is the world's third-largest cruise operator by passenger capacity.

"We are fulfilling our commitment to bringing to the region a modern Asian flagship and we are dedicated to further investing in China and benefiting the local economy," Onorato said.

On Friday, MSC Cruises also announced its 2024-25 winter schedule for China, with two ships to operate from four Chinese ports in the first year of the company's return to the region.

"This is the right time for growth. That's why we are very confident that China's market was waiting to see more ships," Onorato said.

MSC Cruises is not alone. On April 27, the world's largest global cruise line operator, Royal Caribbean International, will sail *Spectrum of the Seas* from Shanghai.

Up until May 2026, Royal Caribbean will offer more than 120 cruises, with itineraries ranging from four to seven nights, and destinations in Japan including Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe, Fukuoka, Kumamoto, Nagasaki, Kagoshima and Okinawa.

"Since we opened sales on June 29, 2023, bookings for cruise ship travel have been surging, and family suite options are already sold out," said Liu Zinan, senior vice-president of the Royal Caribbean Group.

Liu anticipates that "booking volume in the second quarter of this year will be four times that of the pre-pandemic period, with a potential nine-fold increase compared to historical levels in the third and fourth quarters."

Royal Caribbean was one of the first international cruise companies to enter the Chinese market and has cultivated it for 15 years, said Liu, who is also chairman of the Royal Caribbean Cruises in Asia.

"Royal Caribbean has played a catalyst role in fostering a golden decade of cruise development over the past decade, witnessing the remarkable growth of the Chinese cruise industry during its golden age, with annual growth rates exceeding 50 percent," Liu said.

In recent years, the development direction of China's cruise industry has become more diversified, he said.

"After three years of reflection, consumers' demand for cruise products is changing, which also brings us new market opportunities. For instance, there is an emerging trend toward younger demographics and an increasing desire for diverse onboard enter-

tainment experiences, which require guest services to become more diversified for different age groups," Liu said.

Huang Ruiling, president of MSC Cruises China, said: "We have upgraded many dining options and added some Chinese cultural elements to suit Chinese tastes."

Huang described *MSC Bellissima* as a vessel with Chinese imprints. "From the ship's repairs and maintenance, procurement of raw materials and supplies, to staff recruitment and operations, this is a cruise ship that has been upgraded specially for the Chinese market and the preferences of Chinese consumers," Huang said.

After home port operations resume in China, all the produce for Chinese cuisine served onboard will be procured locally, she said.

In order to better serve its Chinese guests, up to 25 percent, or 400 of *MSC Bellissima's* crew members, are fluent in Chinese.

Chinese factor

In the past, the rapid development of China's cruise industry relied heavily on international operators driving growth in the sector, but domestic companies are now major players.

"In the past few years, the participation of Chinese cruise companies including Adora Cruises and China Merchants Viking Cruises has not only brought more capacity to the Chinese cruise market, but also prompted the overall cruise industry chain to improve and develop," said Qiu Ling, chairman and deputy director of the Shanghai International Cruise Business Institute.

The launch of *Adora Magic City*, the first domestically built cruise ship, was a milestone for China's cruise industry.

"Since its maiden commercial voyage on the first day of 2024, *Adora Magic City* successfully

completed 16 trips as of March 9, and its guests cover people born in the 1940s to Generation Z," said Chen Ranfeng, CEO of Adora Cruises Ltd.

Adora Magic City has already announced its itinerary for the year and will sail from Shanghai to destinations in Northeast Asia. The entire Adora fleet will be deployed to multiple ports in East China, South China and North China year-round, with mid- and long-haul journeys to countries including Japan and South Korea as well as ports in Southeast Asia.

"We have already received an abundance of inquiries and bookings for the summer season," Chen said.

Qiu said although Adora Cruises is in the very early days of serving the Chinese market, operations have so far gone smoothly.

"Taking the *Adora Magic City* for instance, we have constantly seen the vessel improve its efficiency and procedures, optimize service quality and enhance passengers' experiences. Such development also indicates the vessel's growing competitiveness and operational capabilities," said Qiu.

Chen believes 2024 will be the year China's cruise market recovers, and the nation's capability in constructing and operating liners will be demonstrated to the public and attract more Chinese travelers.

On the rapid return of international cruise ships, Chen said their participation will boost market penetration and help promote the healthy development of the local market.

Onorato of MSC Cruises said the launch of *Adora Magic City* was a "very positive" development as more domestic products will help the growth of the industry in China. He added that MSC Cruises offered an

"international, strongly European-flavored product" and the arrival of domestic products expanded consumers' choices.

According to Zheng, executive vice-president and secretary-general of the CCYIA, the operation of both domestic and foreign companies in the market is in the best interests of the Chinese cruise industry. Passengers will not only have more choices, but Chinese companies will get the opportunity to learn from their international peers, he added.

"In fact, the Chinese cruise industry's outlook is extremely promising; we can expect a second golden decade to arrive in 2026," said Zheng.

Smooth sailing ahead

Many industry organizations and experts have expressed their confidence in the long-term prospects of the cruise ship sector and believe China can take center stage in the expected boom.

Shipping research institution Clarksons projected in a report on the global cruise market that the sector will rebound from 31 million passenger trips in 2023 to in excess of 40 million by 2028. "In our passenger forecast, the development of China's cruise consumer market will be particularly important," the report noted.

With the resumption of international cruises — operated by both Chinese and multinational companies — the Chinese cruise sentiment index is expected to see a rapid pickup and may go beyond expectations, according to the 2023 China and Asia Cruise Economic Sentiment Index, jointly published by the Shanghai International Cruise Business Institute and the Shanghai University of Engineering Science.

Qiu, from the Shanghai International Cruise Business Institute, said the combination of players in China's cruise market will unleash demand and consumption, diversify premium products, greatly improve industry standards, and aid the formation of a comprehensive policy to help the industry become healthier and more international.

Chen from Adora Cruises said: "We believe that China remains one of the world's most promising sources of cruise passengers. Along

with the further development of China's economy and the ever-growing number of Chinese cruise ship customers, there is strong market potential and demand," he said, adding the company believes China's tourism market will grow further.

In terms of policy support, both the central and local governments have recently introduced various measures to promote the high-quality development of the sector.

Liu of the Royal Caribbean Group said the sailing of *Spectrum of the Seas* in April will represent the return of international standard cruise vacations, and also signal the arrival of the next golden decade in the industry's development.

"The Chinese government has clearly articulated its development goals, aiming to achieve a market size of 14 million cruise guests per year by 2035. With such strong government backing and a growing appetite for cruise travel among Chinese consumers, we anticipate the market will regain its strength," Liu said.

With Shanghai's strengths in cruise ship infrastructure and facilities and its attractiveness to major global cruise lines, it will only be a matter of time before the city returns to its peak, Qiu said.

The overall cruise ship capacity of Shanghai is approaching the 2019 level, but further efforts are needed to improve customer convenience and provide policy support for the market to reach 3 million passenger trips per year.

"Being the birthplace of the nation's first homegrown large cruise ship, Shanghai has the potential and capability to develop itself into the centerpiece of a new global cruise industrial chain," Zheng, from the CCYIA, said.

Major cruise liner shipyards in Europe have already formed several exclusive supply chains after decades of development.

China's industrial chain is still in its infancy, however, different from its European counterparts, the Chinese industrial chain will be inclusive and open to global suppliers, he said.

"It will be a long journey to accomplish such an ambitious goal, and I expect it will take at least a decade to see that come true," Zheng said.



Left: A pool and fitness facilities onboard *MSC Bellissima*, the flagship vessel of Switzerland-headquartered MSC Cruises, which resumed its Chinese port operations in Shanghai on Saturday. **Center:** A robot bartender onboard *Spectrum of the Seas*, a large vessel of cruise line operator Royal Caribbean International. **Right:** *Spectrum of the Seas* is due to sail from Shanghai in April. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

TOP NEWS

Protest escalates



A woman throws a bag of trash at police blocking an anti-government demonstration against food scarcity at soup kitchens and economic reforms proposed by President Javier Milei in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Monday. NATACHA PISARENKO / AP

Close monitoring of real estate sector by policymakers urged

Tighter supervision of financial status of developers can prevent future crises, say experts

By ZHOU LANXU, LIU ZIZHENG and LIU ZHIHUA

China's real estate market will require close monitoring by policymakers, and if there is no marked improvement, stronger efforts to mitigate the credit risks of developers and facilitation of potential debt restructuring will be required, experts said.

Their remarks came amid signs that regulators are sharpening their focus on the financial status of real estate developers. The China Securities Regulatory Commission has found that Evergrande Real Estate Group, the flagship subsidiary of real estate developer China Evergrande Group, had substantially inflated its revenue figures in 2019 and 2020 and engaged in other infractions.

Holding Xu Jiayin, founder and former chairman of China Evergrande Group, responsible for making decisions about and organizing financial fraud, the CSRC is set to fine him 47 million yuan (\$6.53 million) and ban him for life from the securities market, according to filings by Evergrande Real Estate Group on Monday.

The regulator also plans to issue a warning to Evergrande Real Estate, together with a fine of about 4.18 billion yuan.

“China should make further efforts to improve the financing of property developers, ensure their cash flows and help them build better credit.”

Zhang Ning, senior China economist at UBS.

Experts said the strengthening of supervision of the financial status of listed real estate developers can help prevent the recurrence of incidents like the Evergrande crisis, and more policy measures are needed to address the financing woes of real estate developers.

The credit risk of developers is in focus as rating agency Moody's Ratings downgraded property developer China Vanke Co's credit rating last week from Baa3 to Ba1, junk territory.

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed that in the first two months of the year, the total area of newly built commercial housing units sold nationwide was

113.69 million square meters, down 20.5 percent year-on-year. Sluggish property sales, according to experts, could worsen the cash flow situation of developers.

Liu Qiao, dean of Peking University's Guanghua School of Management, said that China still faces a challenge with real estate that will take time to resolve, necessitating the monitoring of key indicators.

If indicators such as new housing starts, property sales and housing prices do not substantially improve year-on-year in the first half, more resolute support through macroeconomic and industrial policies, including those to facilitate debt restructuring, would be warranted, Liu said.

Efforts have been underway to promote a recovery in property sales. Beijing, for instance, will optimize real estate policies based on the actual situation in each district, Xia Linmao, executive vice-mayor of the city, said on Tuesday.

“China should make further efforts to improve the financing of property developers, ensure their cash flows and help them build better credit,” said Zhang Ning, senior China economist at UBS.

Some banks have already implemented a whitelist mechanism to support the financing of eligible

housing projects. However, Zhang said the scope of the whitelists needs to be expanded to stabilize developers' investment and strengthen residents' confidence and willingness to purchase homes. Zhang added that the country should promote the debt restructuring of property developers that are involved in any possible risk events and thereby effectively control the spillover effects.

Ni Hong, minister of housing and urban-rural development, said earlier this month that Chinese housing companies that are insolvent or can no longer operate must file for bankruptcy or restructuring in line with the country's laws and market rules.

“China should also release a larger amount of special funds to ensure the timely delivery of housing projects,” Zhang said.

While the trading of Evergrande's shares in Hong Kong has been suspended since January, the Wind Real Estate Industry Index, an index tracking the A-share real estate sector, dropped by 0.84 percent on Tuesday, compared with a 0.72 percent dip in the benchmark Shanghai Composite Index, which ended at 3,062.76 points on Tuesday.

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Diplomacy: Beijing promotes multipolarity with UN framework

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Wang said, “The future of humanity should be decided by all countries together.” Expressing both realism and optimism, he added that “the road ahead may be tortuous, but the future is bright.”

The foreign minister reaffirmed the critical importance of China-United States relations to our troubled planet. “The China-US relationship is critical to the well-being of the two peoples, and to the future of humanity and the world,” Wang said. He reiterated that Xi's three principles — mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation — are needed to put China-US ties back on an even keel.

The China-US relationship needs to be developed in a particularly wise manner, based on experience since the mid-20th century, when the two sides began to engage with each other.

Wang also insisted that “an equal multipolar world means

equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal rules for every nation,” because of which countries “with the bigger fist should not have the final say”. And he was quick to add that “it is definitely unacceptable that certain countries must be at the table while some others can only be on the menu”, a reference to remarks by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the Munich Security Conference in Germany that “if you are not at the table in the international system, you are going to be on the menu”.

Multipolarity with the United Nations framework is, of course, what Beijing promotes, and Wang was adamant that “multipolarity doesn't mean multiple blocs, or fragmentation, or disarray”.

What China wants, Wang emphasized, is “cooperation under global governance with the UN-centered international system”. He also reaffirmed that “universally beneficial globalization means growing the economic pie

and sharing it more fairly”, adding that “inclusive globalization means supporting countries in pursuing a development path suited to their own national conditions”. Furthermore, he warned that “no one should impose one single development model onto the whole world”.

That's what the West tried during hundreds of years of colonialism in what is nowadays known as the Global South. It turned out to be an utter failure and damaged or even destroyed a multitude of local economies and cultures.

Wang underlined that this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. He said that the principles are a contribution by the East to the whole world and that “they are even more relevant and vibrant than ever”.

The five principles, as enshrined in the Sino-Indian Agreement of 1954, are mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and

sovereignty; mutual nonaggression; mutual noninterference in each other's internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. Wang also reiterated China's involvement in the development of the Global South concept, which includes the Belt and Road Initiative and the growing BRICS community, its solid links with Africa and its historical connection with the UN considering that it was the first country to have signed the UN Charter.

Nearing the end of the news conference, Wang said: “My message is this: China carries out diplomacy for its people. Serving the people and meeting our compatriots' expectations is our abiding mission.”

This is an apt message by one of the world's most seasoned diplomats wrapping up a news conference that offered a great deal of invaluable information and ideas about China's foreign policy as well as the current state of international relations and global governance.

The author is director of the Macau Post Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Chinese airlines increase flights to US

By MINGMEI LI in New York mingmeili@chinadailyusa.com

Chinese passenger airlines are increasing the number of weekly round-trip flights to the United States to effectively handle the expected summer travel rush.

Both countries are making efforts to gradually increase the frequency of direct passenger flights, which were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Starting March 31, the number of flights operated by Chinese carriers will increase to 50 a week from the current 35, the US Department of Transportation said on Monday, bringing the market back to nearly one-third of pre-pandemic levels.

This is “a significant step forward in further normalization of the US-China market in anticipation of the summer 2024 traffic season”, the DOT said in a statement.

However, despite it being the fifth time that the US regulator has increased the quota granted to Chinese carriers since China's post-pandemic reopening, it amounts to only a fraction of the more than 150 weekly round-trip flights permitted by each side before the pandemic.

The DOT said it was in talks with the Civil Aviation Administration of China about a “gradual” reopening of bilateral air services.

Several Chinese passenger airlines have announced adding more round-trip flights between major cities starting March 31. New flights between China and the US operated by Chinese airlines are still mostly confined to Los Angeles and San Francisco.

China Eastern Airlines will add two weekly flights from Shanghai to Los Angeles and one weekly flight from Shanghai to San Francisco. China Southern Airlines will introduce one new weekly flight from Guangzhou to Los Angeles, followed by the addition of two new weekly flights from Guangzhou to San Francisco on April 2.

Air China is adding another weekly flight between Beijing and Los Angeles, as well as two extra weekly flights between New York and Beijing.

“The flights from the East Coast of the US to China are very limited, totaling only six flights altogether,” Air China New York office General

Manager Wang Zhiyong told China Daily.

“On average, there is less than one flight per day, making it very inconvenient for many passengers from the East Coast to travel to China, as they often have to rely on connecting flights.”

“With the addition of these two new flights, our airline will now operate five flights per week, making travel between the two regions more convenient.”

“Currently, there is a severe shortage of seats, and we hope that the addition of these extra flights will effectively alleviate this situation,” he said.

Wang added that each one-way flight operated by Air China has 322 seats.

“As cultural and tourism exchanges between China and the US increase, tourists are eagerly anticipating the addition of more flights, especially direct flights. The youth exchange program agreed upon by China and the US is also progressing positively, but the current lack of flights restricts its potential. Increasing the number of flights can provide more resources for this program.”

US students will begin their summer vacations in May, while Chinese students will have their vacations in July and August, he said. Adding more flights can provide more seats and greater convenience for travelers from both countries during the summer vacation.

Speaking to China Daily, Zeek Mesa, 16, said, “I think it's pretty cool, and there is the chance for me to visit China.”

She said she was excited about the increase in flights. “I'm very into China's art and culture; I think that is traditional, and there's so much history behind the country.”

Her mother, Jodi, said, “I think one of the big challenges is the geopolitical climate.”

“We're hoping that there's going to be a little bit more ‘combined agreements’, and for people like us, we can still go visit. We can still exchange ideas and everything like that.”

“Always wanted to see the Great Wall of China. I know that's one of the most touristy things, but hopefully I will be able to see it in the near future.”



Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu (front center) poses with government officials and lawmakers at the chamber after the third reading of the proposed Safeguarding National Security Ordinance at the Legislative Council in Hong Kong on Tuesday. EDMOND TANG / CHINA DAILY

HK: Ordinance hailed as milestone for city's stability

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city's long-term stability and prosperity and the sustained implementation of “one country, two systems”.

In a statement released on Tuesday, the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council said that the passage of the ordinance symbolizes the implementation of the constitutional responsibility of the Hong Kong SAR to safeguard national security, which fulfills the long-awaited aspiration of the whole country, including Hong Kong compatriots.

Also in separate statements, the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong SAR and the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region called it a milestone since the city's return to the motherland, as it will help to protect the city's long-term stability and prosperity. A groundswell of support also

poured in from the city's disciplined services — which include police, fire and correctional services, customs and immigration departments, and business chambers, enterprises and social groups — who said it will not only safeguard national security, but also provide confidence to investors.

The legislature resumed the second-reading debate on the bill on Tuesday morning. The ordinance was approved in the third reading following a review of the bill and its 91 government-proposed amendments.

The ordinance makes broad references to national security laws in other jurisdictions. The government had also considered suggestions from the community during its monthlong public consultation from Jan 30 through Feb 28, and from lawmakers during the nearly 50 hours of scrutiny in a bills committee.

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CHINA

Backyard program brings tech to the fields

By ZHANG YU in Shijiazhuang
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Chinese authorities have encouraged universities and research institutes to promote the Science and Technology Backyard program, in which teachers and students participate in agricultural production in rural areas.

The program was launched in 2009 by China Agricultural University in Quzhou county, Hebei province, with an aim to study and solve practical agricultural problems in rural areas, develop high-level agricultural talent and contribute to rural and agricultural modernization.

A policy paper issued by the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council on Jan 1, also known as the No 1 Central Document, stressed the need to promote the program while encouraging experts from scientific research institutes and universities to play an active role in improving agriculture in rural areas.

"We analyzed the conditions of winter wheat seedlings for local farmers in Quzhou, and taught them the knowledge and skills needed for water and fertilizer management, and to prevent and control plant diseases, insect pests and weeds," said Feng Jiuru, a graduate student from China Agricultural University who conducted research at the Wangzhuang Science and Technology Backyard program in Quzhou.

Together with 77 other students, Feng took part in a training session earlier this month on the management of winter wheat, which is the main crop grown this time of year.

They trained more than 2,400 farmers in Quzhou, who said they greatly benefited from the students' explanations and training.

"Spring has arrived, and it's a critical time for managing wheat, as various diseases and weed infestations are starting to appear in the fields," farmer Wang Junshan said.

Wang planted 2 hectares of wheat last winter.

"The teachers and students have explained clearly how to manage each type of seedling, how to fertilize and irrigate, and how to prevent and control different diseases and pests, which has really been a great help to us," Wang said.

According to Feng, the students also introduced some new agricultural technologies to the farmers, including satellite navigation that

can assist with the planting of winter wheat and summer corn, as well as drone remote sensing diagnosis that can help the farmers save money and increase production.

"For over a decade, the backyard program has pioneered a new path of deep integration between scientists and farmers, closely combining science and technology with industry," Zhong Denghua, Party chief of China Agricultural University, was quoted as saying in a report by People's Daily Overseas Edition.

Zhong added that the program has given farmers an avenue to increase their incomes and has cultivated a high-quality agricultural talent pool in rural areas.

As of March 12, more than 1,200 Science and Technology Backyard programs have been established by 74 universities and institutions nationwide, involving more than 2,700 experts and over 5,200 graduate students, according to a recent report.

The programs have introduced 284 green agricultural production technologies, with a cumulative application area of 37.7 million hectares, resulting in an accumulated increase in income and cost savings of over 70 billion yuan (\$9.7 billion), the report said.

The programs are also being started abroad to share China's experiences with the world.

In April, experts and students from China Agricultural University will go to Malawi to train local farmers.

Since 2022, four Science and Technology Backyard programs have been launched by students from Malawi who have studied at the Beijing university and took part in the program in Quzhou. The four programs have facilitated training sessions for local farmers and the promotion of agricultural technologies.

"April is the time for farmers to harvest corn, so we will take this opportunity to carry out a three-day training session to consolidate existing achievements," said Gao Xinyue, a graduate student in Quzhou who will go to Malawi next month.

In 2019, China Agricultural University launched the Sino-Africa Science and Technology Backyard project in Quzhou to cultivate young technical talent for African nations, targeting the pressing production issues faced by small-holder farmers. It has nurtured 72 graduate students from over 10 African countries, according to Gao.

Balancing act



Children play an egg-standing game during an activity to welcome the Spring Equinox at Pingjiang Experimental Kindergarten in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, on Tuesday. Standing an egg upright is a popular game across the country during the Spring Equinox, which falls on Wednesday this year. It is believed that if someone can make the egg stand, they will have good luck in the future. HANG XINGWEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Reviews help ensure justice

Courts reverse erroneous judgments following appeals by procuratorates

By YANG ZEKUN
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Procuratorates nationwide filed 7,876 protests against criminal judgments deemed erroneous last year to ensure justice and the fairness of the judiciary, the top procuratorate stated in its annual work report.

The Supreme People's Procuratorate's Work Report for 2023, approved by the National People's Congress on March 11, said that 79.9 percent of the protested criminal judgments were changed after review.

In one case mentioned in the report, a man named Chen Cang, along with others, broke into a residence to commit theft in April 1997.

A woman sleeping in the house woke up, and fearing detection, Chen repeatedly struck her head and face with a hammer, killing her. He then strangled her son to death and fled the scene with valuables.

In June 2014, when Chen was detained for another theft-related crime, police matched his fingerprints with those extracted from the first crime. Despite initially confessing to the 1997 crime, Chen later recanted multiple times. He was prosecuted in June 2015 and sentenced to death by the Intermediate People's Court of Hengshui, Hebei province, in March 2016. Chen appealed, and in December 2018, the Higher People's Court of Hebei Province

acquitted him of all charges.

The Hebei Provincial Procuratorate appealed the ruling.

In April 2021, the Supreme People's Court instructed the Higher People's Court of Shandong Province to retry the case. In January 2024, the Shandong court sentenced Chen to death with a reprieve.

Yang Jianbo, deputy director of the SPP's general office, emphasized that procurators should not only pursue criminals but also protect the innocent.

The changes in the rulings demonstrate that procuratorial organs have upheld the principle of combating crime and safeguarding human rights, impartiality and justice, he said.

The case dates back many years, and the legal procedures involved are complex. However, the procura-

torial organs have persisted in supervision for over 10 years. In the end, the guilty have been punished, proving the value of the rule of law and the need for supervision, he said.

Additionally, in 2023, procuratorates supervised the filing or withdrawal of 139,000 cases by investigative agencies, a year-on-year increase of 68.2 percent. For cases that do not constitute a crime or lack sufficient evidence, they refused to arrest 210,000 people and declined to prosecute 54,000 people, representing year-on-year increases of 51.1 percent and 10.4 percent, respectively.

For cases that should have led to arrests or prosecutions but did not, procuratorates added 19,000 arrests and 99,000 prosecutions last year, marking year-on-year increases of 12.8 percent and 66 percent, respectively.

Nanjing University pioneers AI education system

By CANG WEI in Nanjing
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Nanjing University in Jiangsu province is breaking new ground in Chinese higher education as it prepares to roll out a pioneering "core curriculum system in artificial intelligence literacy" for incoming students this September.

The initiative aims to foster highly adaptable talent, marking a significant first among universities in China. More than 3,700 new students will have access to this AI literacy program, which follows a "1+X+Y" framework.

The framework includes a mandatory core AI literacy course (1), additional AI literacy courses (X), and interdisciplinary courses (Y) that integrate various fields with artificial intelligence. The educational approach will encompass knowledge, skills, values and ethics.

Students who meet certain conditions can obtain a certificate for studying artificial intelligence alongside their majors.

Wang Jun, executive vice-dean of Nanjing University's undergraduate

school, said that after conducting comprehensive research and consultation with experts, teachers and students from diverse fields since the latter half of 2023, the university is moving forward with the development of a general education curriculum in AI.

"We believe that promoting general education in artificial intelligence is both timely and urgent," he said, adding that the university has established interdisciplinary teaching and research efforts to address the content, scope, course design and teaching methods for the framework.

Tan Tieniu, a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Party chief of Nanjing University, emphasized the challenges of providing comprehensive education in AI for students from diverse academic backgrounds.

"We have constructed a curriculum system that balances unity and diversity," he said. "While meeting the basic requirements of core literacy, we also take into account the personalized needs of different students, gradually enhancing their lit-

eracy and skills to better adapt to the development of the AI era," he said.

He noted that Nanjing University is encouraging the development of advanced practical courses to support students in applying AI technology for interdisciplinary exploration, ultimately nurturing highly skilled and adaptable talent.

"Artificial intelligence is increasingly becoming an essential and integral part of people's lives and work," Tan said. "As AI rapidly advances, public perceptions have diversified, leading to a sense of cognitive confusion and anxiety. This has sparked an urgent need for the incorporation of general education in AI. In the age of intelligence, every college student should possess fundamental AI literacy."

Tan added that the core general education curriculum system has garnered widespread praise, prompting several universities to inquire about related training programs. Undergraduate students in their second and third years at Nanjing University have also expressed strong interest in studying AI.

The university will collaborate with enterprises to provide students with opportunities to engage in cutting-edge scientific research projects, participate in practical application scenarios, and develop innovative capabilities to address complex challenges across various disciplines in the future intelligent era.

In 2018, Nanjing University took the lead in establishing the School of Artificial Intelligence and released the "Talent Training Program for AI", creating the first comprehensive undergraduate professional AI education system in China.

In 2022, the university expanded its efforts by establishing the Intelligent Science and Technology School and the Intelligent Software and Engineering School at its Suzhou campus with the goal of nurturing skilled professionals to meet the needs of emerging industries.

The university has also initiated interdisciplinary programs such as "AI for Science" and "AI for HASS" (Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences), offering over 50 specialized courses that apply AI technology across various fields.

Test time



Self-driving vehicles prepare to undergo testing on the newly opened autonomous driving test roads in Pudong New Area in Shanghai on Tuesday. Shanghai's autonomous driving test roads exceed 2,000 kilometers in total length. CHEN MENGZE / FOR CHINA DAILY

'Blind box' socialization a hit among young people

By YANG ZEKUN
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Joining a group of strangers for an activity, such as having a meal or playing a game, has become popular among young people.

This social phenomenon, also known as "blind box socialization," involves participants whose identities remain unknown until they meet, akin to selecting a box whose content is a mystery. The uncertainty of other participants brings about a tremendous sense of novelty, which is the key attraction for young people seeking surprising social encounters.

Activities such as dining out,

shopping and playing outdoor games such as hide and seek and throwing a frisbee are often initiated online by individuals who recruit a group of strangers to participate.

Some participants have said that they have made many new friends through such activities, while some have admitted encountering instances of impolite behavior.

Hu Lingling, a 28-year-old employee at an internet company in Beijing, discovered blind box socialization activities on the lifestyle-sharing platform Xiaohongshu last year. As she is not a Beijing native and lacks local friends, especially those interested in outdoor activities, she decided to join these activi-

ties to meet new friends.

Before each event, she joins a WeChat group formed by the organizer. Upon arriving at the venues, she noticed that participants would warmly greet each other, making her feel comfortable.

Hu described blind box events as enriching social choices, broadening social channels, improving social efficiency and alleviating the pressure of getting together with acquaintances for young people with socialization needs.

"In this environment, everyone can chat casually, even venting their usual work and life frustrations during activities. Because all the participants are strangers, I don't have to

worry about getting along with them. When communicating with strangers, I don't have to consider their emotions as much as handling relationships with friends. We can play together if we want to and disperse if we wish," she said.

Hu mentioned that many participants often mention being introverted and not inclined to socialize, hoping to find a channel for communication and interaction.

When she first participated last June, she approached it with a try-it-out attitude, with some doubts. The people she encountered were diverse and unpredictable, making her feel fresh and a bit exhilarated. Over time, she grew to enjoy this

form of socialization.

She also organized two such events herself, hiking on a hill in Mentougou district and camping at a site in Changping district in Beijing.

Hu acknowledged seeing some complaints about harassment and scams on social media, recognizing the risks and negative behaviors from other participants.

"We can't condemn it outright. After all, the emergence of this socializing method reflects a demand among young people and a new trend to avoid socializing with acquaintances. What we need to do is to strengthen screening and prevention measures to minimize these negative occurrences," she said.

Participants should be mindful of potential risks, and organizers of

such activities should fulfill their legal responsibilities, said Han Xiao, a lawyer from the Beijing Kangda Law Firm, as the Civil Code stipulates that event organizers who fail to fulfill their safety obligations bear liability.

In case of accidents or emergencies, organizers might be liable if they fail to prevent coercive drinking, ensure the safe return of intoxicated individuals, prevent drunk driving or fail to provide reminders and care, he said.

Han suggested organizers prepare safety plans, inform participants of the activity content and risks in writing before the start, and advise participants to verify the authenticity of organizers and activities before participating, preserving relevant evidence if inappropriate behaviors occur.

CHINA

Block by block, artificial reefs restoring fish stocks off coast of Fujian province

FUZHOU — Fishermen in the city of Putian in East China's Fujian province are doing something very cool out at sea — they are using giant but hollow cement Rubik's cubes to build reefs to shelter fish.

Multiple holes on the surface of the cubes allow fish to easily navigate these artificial reefs, making them suitable as places to live, breed and hide from potential predators. These efforts are about more than just protecting the fish, as they also contribute to curbing illegal fishing, safeguarding local fishery resources and alleviating seabed "desertification", said Wang Qinghua, from the marine fishery station in Nanri township.

Huge engineering ships are used to transport hundreds of reef cubes, which are then gradually lowered into the coastal waters of Nanri Island, Putian. Cranes handle the cubes in a process resembling the grabbing of toys with a gigantic claw machine. Once the cubes have been released, crews dive into the water to check their stability, allowing for the adjustment of positions to prevent or correct any tilting that may occur.

"As the seawater slowly reduces the alkalinity of the cement, small algae will attach to and grow on the cubes to form the artificial reef,



Artificial reefs are lowered into the waters off Nanri Island in Putian, Fujian province. ZHOU YI / XINHUA

thereby attracting more fish to it. Additionally, a variety of benthic organisms and corals will also attach to the cubes, forming a distinct ecosystem with the artificial reef as its foundation," explained Yan Zhihong, head of the water technology station in Putian's Xiuyu district.

To monitor and manage fish stocks and these artificial reef areas, Nanri Island has launched an underwater online observation program. "We have monitoring equipment on the reefs that are connected to the internet to provide real-time

monitoring of the living conditions of the fish and measure water temperature, oxygen levels, changes in currents and so on," Yan said.

These monitoring efforts have revealed the artificial reefs have become thriving habitats for a diverse range of colorful fish species. Some large fish have even approached the surveillance cameras out of curiosity. "We discovered a variety of fish, including crab-like blunt-toothed sturgeon and Japanese sturgeon," Yan added.

During the 1990s, the waters sur-

rounding Nanri Island had an abundance of marine fishery resources, including significant numbers of shrimp and fish. However, overfishing depleted the biodiversity in the area.

"As a result, the fish population significantly decreased, and the smiles vanished from the faces of our fishermen," said Chen Yacong, a local fisherman.

Thanks to more than 2,700 reef cubes placed in nearby waters since 2012, the local marine environment is on the mend. "Over the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of fish, which means we can now earn more money without having to spend as much time on the water," Chen said.

In late 2018, the waters surrounding Nanri Island were designated as Fujian's first national-level marine pasture demonstration area.

Experts and researchers who assessed the area found that the biomass and resource density of the reef area had both increased significantly after the casting of the artificial reef, while the reef area is also able to effectively shelter juvenile fish of economic species. This means the reef-building program has proved to be a beneficial solution — both economically and ecologically.

"We are continuing our efforts to breed more fish fry and release them in the reef area. From 2020 to the end of 2023, over 80 million fry of all kinds of fish were released in these waters," said Yan.

XINHUA

Biodiversity improving in Sichuan

Dedicated ranger strides mountains to ensure rare species flourish once again

By HUANG ZHILING and PENG CHAO in Chengdu

For Zhu Dahai, the most exhilarating moment in his job is discovering images of rare wild animals while checking the infrared cameras set up in the wilderness.

Zhu, 47, is head of the Longchi substation of the Dujiangyan management and protection station in the Giant Panda National Park in Sichuan province. He's dedicated himself to ecological conservation and biodiversity protection for 22 years.

"I am so proud to see the wildlife thriving on the land I have been protecting. It gives me a great sense of accomplishment," he said.

Driven by his curiosity for giant pandas and passion for rare plants, Zhu came to the Longxi-Hongkou National Nature Reserve, a major part of today's Dujiangyan section of the Giant Panda National Park, in 2001 to become a forest ranger after graduating from college.

Located about 80 kilometers to the northwest of the urban area of Chengdu, capital of Southwest China's Sichuan, the Dujiangyan section of the Giant Panda National Park covers a total area of 394 square km.

With the altitude ranging from 860 meters to 4,582 meters, the area is among the world's top global biodiversity hot spots, where a total of 1,068 animal species and 2,830 plant species have been recorded. It is also a key region and natural corridor for the survival and reproduction of giant pandas living in the Minshan and Qionglai mountain ranges.

Zhu said his main duties include wildlife monitoring, forest fire prevention, promoting ecological protection and assisting in ecological protection-related research.

Except for January to March, when heavy snow seals the mountain passes, Zhu and his colleagues take turns conducting patrols every day. There are eight daily patrol routes at the Longchi substation, with the longest and shortest routes taking at least 10 hours and around four hours respectively.

"During spring and autumn each year, there are special patrols that last for one to two weeks that require overnight stays in the wilderness," he said.

During his patrols in the wilderness, Zhu has encountered dangerous situations on several occasions

such as blizzards, mudslides and wild animal attacks.

The most dangerous was in 2012 when he led a team of 10 people up the 4,582-meter-high Guangguang Mountain to explore the path for a scientific expedition team. They became trapped in the mountains by a sudden heavy snowfall and nearly lost their lives due to cold and hunger.

Despite the hardship and danger, Zhu believes his work is worthwhile, as it has resulted in the continuous improvement of the ecological environment.

"The most obvious change is the rapid increase in the number of wild animals. The golden snub-nosed monkeys and takins, for example, were once hard to see, but they are now frequently captured by infrared cameras, and we can even see them by ourselves during our patrols," he said.

Zhu said the number of wild giant pandas is also steadily increasing in the Dujiangyan section.

"The third National Giant Panda Census in 2001 showed there were only nine wild giant pandas in the section, while the fourth census issued in 2015 showed the number had increased to 14," he said, adding that infrared cameras in the section have recorded images of a mother panda with a cub about once every two years over the past decade.

Recently, Zhu has been preparing for this year's first patrol. His biggest hope is to find traces of the female giant pandas Qin Xin and Xiao He Tao, who were captive-born and released into the wild in late 2018.

"At the end of 2021, we found fresh feces from Xiao He Tao. Based on the fecal samples, she lives well and is in good health," Zhu said.

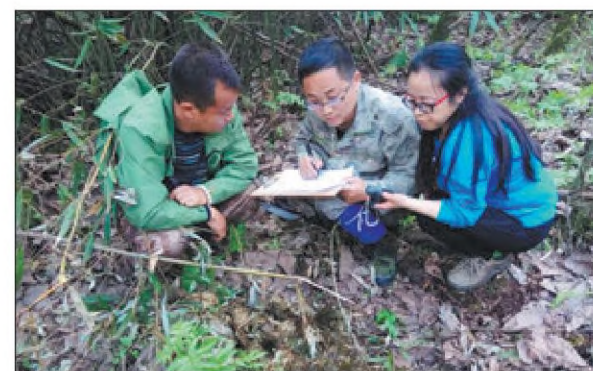
The two pandas were two-and-a-half years old when released, and if they've successfully found mates, they might have offspring by now, he added.

Zhu and his colleagues also organize forest lectures and panda classes to raise public awareness about ecological conservation and biodiversity protection.

"The average age of forest rangers at our substation is over 50. I hope more young people will become interested in our work and join us," he said.

Zhang Chunqi contributed to this story.

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Zhu Dahai (middle) works with fellow researchers in the Giant Panda National Park in Sichuan province. LIU JIFU / FOR CHINA DAILY



Tibetan farmers sow seeds after a tractor has plowed the land in Nedong district of Lhokha, Xizang autonomous region, on Saturday during a spring farming ceremony. TENZIN LHAZES / FOR CHINA DAILY

Spring farming ceremonies embrace tradition, modernization in Xizang

LHASA — On Saturday, annual spring farming ceremonies unfolded across agricultural areas of Southwest China's Xizang autonomous region, blending tradition with modern agricultural practices.

In Punsum village of Chonggyai county, in the city of Lhokha, the silence on the plateau fields was broken by the roaring of tractors. Nearly 30 parked in orderly formation as villagers presented the drivers with white *hada*, traditional Tibetan silk scarves, symbolizing purity and auspiciousness.

Among them was Gyapel Tsering, a 56-year-old tractor driver clad in a conical yellow hat and a black woolen garment. At around 10 am, his tractor, adorned with a red tassel and bell reminiscent of those once decorating plowing yaks for millennia in Xizang, led

the way into the fertile fields amid rising smoke from Tibetan incense.

"Our village's agricultural production has undergone full mechanization, significantly cutting down the time needed for plowing fields from over 10 days to just a few," said Gyapel Tsering, who acquired his tractor over a decade ago and oversees 0.8 hectares of crop fields.

Punsum village boasts a population of 696 residents and over 87 hectares of cultivated land, according to Dawa, the Party secretary of the village.

"We primarily cultivated high-quality varieties of plateau barley," he said. "The yield per *mu* (one-15th of a hectare) in our fields is approximately 300 kilograms, marking an increase of nearly 50 kg compared to previous years," he added.

With the widespread adoption of agricultural mechanization, the traditional plowing method, known as "two yaks lifting a yoke", has gradually faded into obscurity. However, in Gyaimain village, situated approximately 10 kilometers from Punsum, this ancient practice is still honored during the spring farming ceremony.

Wangdu, a 67-year-old villager, rose early on Saturday to prepare his plowing yaks for the ceremony. "The plowing ceremony is one of the most significant events of the year, attended by the entire village," he said.

In a nearby field, 12 men, surrounded by over 100 villagers, sang traditional songs as they guided their yaks to plow the first furrow of the year.

"Every spring, we continue to hold the ceremony to better pre-

serve our agricultural culture of the plateau area," said Thubten, head of the village committee.

Chonggyai county aims to cultivate a grain area of 1,330 hectares this year, primarily focusing on plateau barley, according to the county's agriculture and rural affairs bureau.

Since the onset of spring, various townships and villages in the county have organized technical personnel to inspect and maintain agricultural machinery, as well as transport high-quality seeds, such as plateau barley and wheat, to ensure smooth spring plowing.

Data from the regional agriculture and rural affairs bureau showed that Xizang had established 287,000 hectares of high-standard farmland as of Dec 1 last year, and plans to add an additional 21,300 hectares this year.

The grain output of the region has remained stable at over 1 million metric tons for nine consecutive years.

XINHUA

Thriving tea industry infuses vitality into rural town in Guangxi

NANNING — In the early spring, the slopes of the mountains in Zhaoping county in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region are a hive of activity as farmers navigate their way through the lush tea bushes, their baskets full of freshly picked tea leaves.

Tea in Zhaoping has grown into a pivotal industry for local farmers, increasing incomes and breathing new life into their rural communities.

With its scale continuing to expand, the planting area and

output of tea have increased gradually and the reputation of Zhaoping tea has become very influential.

"I have been working in a local tea garden for a long time and now earn up to 200 yuan (\$28) per day," said Liu Mei, a resident of Zhaoping, who added she has been especially busy of late.

"Compared to finding a job far away, I prefer working here in the tea garden close to my home. Additionally, the earnings are respectable. They also provide

training, allowing me to enrich my understanding of tea tree planting and management," Liu added.

Apart from the tea farmers walking back and forth, tourists can also be spotted in the fields, as tea-related tourism has made a stir.

Wandering the winding trails of the tea mountains, visitors can learn about tea tree varieties, organic tea cultivation management, fresh leaf picking and environmentally friendly pest control, as well as experience the planting and picking

process, tea roasting and tea oil making.

Wu Yongying, deputy general manager of Guxiang, said the company has been developing leisure agriculture tourism, improving tourism infrastructure and related facilities and enhancing services for visitors.

The burgeoning tea-related tourism industry has also helped promote the development of the local tea industry and the millennia-old tea culture of Zhaoping.

In recent years, Zhaoping has also

optimized its industrial structure to maximize its potential.

Guangxi Jiangjunfeng Tea Industry Group, located in an industrial park north of Zhaoping, has introduced automation. "The company has achieved intelligent production of tea processing, effectively promoting standardized tea production and increasing output," said a company official, adding the tea products will be sold in provinces such as Guangdong and Fujian.

Last year, the tea plantation area

in Zhaoping exceeded 17,333 hectares, with a dry tea output of 20,900 metric tons and output value surpassing 2.4 billion yuan. The tea industry in the county employs 120,000 people, with an average annual income surpassing over 5,000 yuan.

"In the next step, Zhaoping will further increase investment in the development of the tea industry, continuously focusing on organic tea and pursuing the high-quality development of the tea industry," said Huang Shouping, head of the agriculture and rural affairs bureau of Zhaoping county.

XINHUA

WORLD

Experts hail Xizang plan for students

Boarding school program benefiting 1 million children in region applauded

By CHEN WEIHUA in Geneva
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Dechen Shak-Dagsay, a Swiss Tibetan musician, said she wishes the student boarding school project in Xizang will be "very sustainable and successful".

She made the comment during a seminar on Monday at the University of Geneva, where scholars from China and Europe compared notes on the protection of human rights for ethnic minorities in China.

Jia Chunyang, executive director of the Center for Economic and Social Security Studies of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, gave a presentation on the boarding schools in Xizang based on his research.

His study finds about two-thirds of students say they "like it very much" or "like it" living in boarding schools, while 30.56 percent say "average". Only 5.15 percent of students chose "dislike" or "dislike very much".

An overwhelming 71.43 percent of the parents felt "reassured" about their children living in boarding schools.

"Boarding schools in Xizang are an important manifestation of the Chinese government's legal protection and promotion of the rights of school-age children of all ethnic groups in Xizang to receive education and the promotion of the all-round development of school-age children of all ethnic groups," Jia said.

He said the boarding schools are not perfect and his survey shows that some students hope for more varieties of food, more spacious dorms and more sports events.

"These are areas where we need to continue to work hard in the future," he said.

Shak-Dagsay, who had collaborated with the late legendary singer Tina Turner, visited Lhasa for the first time last year and played a concert there.

"You can imagine the feeling. I grew up in Switzerland from the age of 3, and to be in Lhasa for the first time in my life after 64 years, and the first time hearing the Tibetan language spoken all over

the place. It was like coming home, coming to the place where my roots are," she said.

She was happy to learn from the presentation that China has successfully implemented an unprecedented educational program that can benefit almost 1 million Tibetan children.

She had watched a TV program about the boarding schools which she says "are putting a lot of emphasis" on teaching the Tibetans their native language. "It's very important that they read and write in Tibetan, and also obtain an academic degree in this subject," she said.

Unique opportunity

"Let me thank you for giving our young generation in Tibet such a unique opportunity to excel in their studies, and each one becomes a precious gem, shining from the roof of the world. Thank you also for the absolute poverty eradication of over half a million Tibetans in Tibet autonomous region by the end of 2019," she said.

"This is indeed very impressive. And it deserves acknowledgment for enabling Tibetans (to live) a dignified life."

The seminar, sponsored by the China Society for Human Rights Studies, saw a packed classroom.

Andre Lacroix, a Belgian Tibetologist, shared his experience of how he got interested in Xizang after visiting China in the 1990s. He had accompanied his daughter who was pursuing China studies and is now a Sinologist teaching at a French university.

He told China Daily that "in Europe, we are under the impression that Tibetans are an oppressed minority, that their rights are not respected".

"However, when you go to Tibet, you open a totally different window on the situation," he said in French.

He said that in 1999 before he visited Xizang for the first time, he also believed that Tibetans were victims of cultural genocide from the various publications he read.

"But I witnessed the richness of monasteries, the omnipresence of monks, the vitality and abundance of cultural events," he said.



Belgian Tibetologist Andre Lacroix speaks at a human rights seminar on Monday. CHEN WEIHUA / CHINA DAILY

Blinding storm



Vehicles try to move through a severe sandstorm that paralyzes traffic on a road in Cairo on Monday. March to May is the season of sandstorm in Egypt. The dry-hot wind blows from the Sahara Desert hinterland and sweeps across Egypt, making the sky orange with sands. AHMED SAYED / GETTY IMAGES

Japan ends era of negative interest rates

By JIANG XUEQING in Tokyo
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The Bank of Japan announced its decision to end negative interest rates on Tuesday, marking a major shift from years of unprecedented monetary easing.

At a two-day monetary policy meeting starting on Monday, the central bank announced its first benchmark rate hike in 17 years, guiding overnight lending rates to 0 percent to 0.1 percent, up a fraction from minus 0.1 percent to 0 percent.

The bank also decided to end its yield curve control policy, which aims to suppress long-term interest rates alongside short-term interest rates, and to scrap purchases of exchange-traded funds and Japanese real estate investment trusts.

"The BOJ's exit from the negative interest rate policy will give us a signal that a virtuous cycle between wages and prices is gradually embedded in the Japanese economy. That kind of a signal effect will outweigh an impact arising from a 10-basis-point rate hike," said Kyohei Morita, chief Japan economist at Nomura Securities.

Economists at Nomura expected the BOJ to leave all the measures "invented" during yield curve con-

trol, such as fixed-rate Japanese government bond purchasing operations and common collateral operations, in its toolbox so that the bank can make use of them whenever necessary. Thus, the bank will remain engaged in the Japanese government bond market going forward, Morita said.

Nomura economists believe the BOJ will make an additional rate hike to 0.25 percent in October, assuming the economy will continue to recover and that core consumer price index inflation will remain at or above 2 percent year-on-year.

'Symbolic move'

"The BOJ's end of negative rates would be largely a symbolic move, as we think it does not wish to signal the start of an aggressive rate-hiking cycle similar to what has transpired with developed market central banks," said Park Chong-hoon, head of South Korea and Japan economic research at Standard Chartered Bank.

He was of the view that the BOJ wants to close the chapter on its ultra-accommodative monetary policy, which has set it apart from other central banks such as the European Central Bank and the United States Federal Reserve.

Moreover, the BOJ has also indicated that Japan is slowly but steadily moving out of a deflationary environment amid growing economic resilience, fueled by sizable wage increases negotiated by Japan's largest labor confederation.

The 7-million-member Japanese Trade Union Confederation, known as Rengo, announced on Friday that its member unions achieved an average wage increase of 5.28 percent this year, the most substantial rise since 1991.

The wage hikes occurred in the backdrop of increasing labor shortage, ongoing inflation, and a weakened yen. The overall wage increase exceeded last year's figure by 1.48 percentage points, according to Rengo's initial tally of the results, and provided the BOJ with another reason to increase interest rates.

Park said the indirect impact of Japan's move to end negative rates will be more salient in the foreign exchange market, as a weak yen has translated into higher corporate margins, and imported inflation for products sourced from overseas. "We think Japan's rate differential versus the US will stay wide for the foreseeable future, as we do not expect the BOJ to hike aggressively."

Blockades hit North Sea oil, gas facilities

By EARLE GALE in London
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Protesters have launched a coordinated, Europe-wide wave of blockades and demonstrations aimed at highlighting the continued exploitation of North Sea oil and gas and its harm to the environment.

Fossil fuel processing facilities in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom were targeted in the action, which began on Saturday.

Infrastructure impacted included oil and gas terminals, refineries and ports where fossil fuels are handled.

Some of the blockades resulted in the complete paralysis of facilities while others did not significantly impact their operation.

Extinction Rebellion, the climate activist organization that coordinated the blockades, said in a statement, "Under the campaign North Sea Fossil Free, acts of civil disobedience are happening all around the North Sea." The group said the governments

of the six countries were "permitting new fossil extraction infrastructure, harming not only the North Sea ecosystem, but also committing the whole world to dangerous levels of warming", which is why the nations were targeted.

"Activists have come together ... to demand all North Sea oil countries align their drilling plans with the Paris Agreement now." Extinction Rebellion said, referring to the deal struck in 2015 in which nations vowed to keep the rise in mean global temperature to well below 2 C above preindustrial levels and preferably limit it to 1.5 C.

The protests followed the release of a report by campaign group Oil Change International that said Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK had all failed to align their oil and gas policies with their promises under the Paris Agreement to cut greenhouse gas emissions and limit global warming.

The report criticizes the nations for making promises while simultaneously exploring and licensing new

oil and gas fields, and says Norway has been the furthest among them from delivering on its promises.

Jonas Kittelsen, a spokesperson for Extinction Rebellion Norway, said as activists blocked the entrance to a petroleum refinery in Rafnes, on the country's southeast coast, his country seemed to be putting money ahead of the planet's health.

"I'm ashamed to be a Norwegian," The Guardian newspaper quoted him as saying. "Norway profits massively from aggressively expanding our oil and gas sector, causing mass suffering and death globally. My government portrays us as better than the rest of the world, which we are not."

The flurry of demonstrations continued on Monday when Extinction Rebellion activists spread fake oil on the ground outside the GB News UK television news station.

Branding the broadcaster a "puppet TV station" for the fossil fuel industry, protesters picketed its studio in London, forcing workers to enter through another door.

Kate makes appearance to quash speculation

By JONATHAN POWELL
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The United Kingdom's Princess of Wales has been spotted and filmed walking in public for the first time since December, partly quelling feverish online speculation about possible reasons for her recent absence from view.

Kensington Palace, the official royal residence of Prince William and his wife Kate, had said previously that the abdominal surgery the princess underwent in January was planned, and that she would be out of the public eye until April.

In recent weeks social media has been flooded with speculation about Kate's health, prompting global headlines.

On Monday, The Sun newspaper's website published the first video taken of the princess since Christmas Day, showing her looking "relaxed and happy" alongside her husband, on a shopping trip in Windsor.

The appearance follows Kate's recent public apology for altering a photograph featuring her and her children, which had been shared for Mother's Day. Several news agencies issued a "kill" notice on the image, because of the extent to which it had been manipulated.

The Sun quoted shopper Nelson Silva, who took the video, as saying the couple appeared "super relaxed".

He said: "I noticed a couple choosing loaves of bread and the woman turned her face and I felt like I had seen the face before. It was familiar. I knew it from somewhere."

"Then William turned back and I thought, 'hold on, I know this person.' I said to the staff, 'I think it's them,' as I paid."

"I went to my car and as they came out of the shop I just filmed them. I think they walked out through a gate out of the grounds. They just vanished and I didn't see a car. I just wanted to share with my family footage and show just how normal they were."

Reuters news agency said Kensington Palace declined to comment on the video, with a spokesperson only sharing that Kate's recovery was progressing positively and confirming that her official engagements were postponed until after Easter, which falls on March 31.

Privacy emphasized

The palace office had previously emphasized the importance of her privacy and said it would only provide information when there were significant updates.

Explaining why it had published the video, The Sun said: "We have chosen to both report (Kate's) appearance in yesterday's paper, and show the footage today, in a bid to bring an end to what the palace has called the 'madness of social media'."

Amateur sleuths have been analyzing the princess's recent activities, conjuring up wild conspiracy theories online.

A recent poll by Sky News shows more than half of people in the UK have seen the conspiracy theories on social media about why the princess is absent from public life, but that it "hasn't dented trust in the royal family".

Cuba accuses US of stoking protests, summons envoy

HAVANA — Cuba's Foreign Ministry said it had summoned the top US diplomat on the island to a meeting following protests on Sunday, accusing the US embassy in Havana of seeking to stoke a broader anti-government uprising and meddling in Cuba's internal affairs, which Washington has denied involvement.

Rallies in protest of blackouts and food shortages erupted in at least five locations across the island on Sunday, including Cuba's second-largest city Santiago, state-run media said.

The US government said on X late on Sunday that it was monitoring the protests and encouraged the Cuban government to "respect the human rights of the protesters and address the legitimate needs of the Cuban people".

Those comments prompted Cuba's Foreign Ministry to call charge d'affaires Benjamin Ziff to a meeting with deputy foreign minister Carlos Fernandez de Cossio, "who formally conveyed his firm rejection of the government's interventionist behavior and slanderous messages", a statement from the ministry said.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Vedant Patel said: "The United States is not behind these protests in Cuba and the accusation of that is absurd."

Cuba's Foreign Ministry on Monday repeated the government's longstanding accusation that a Cold War-era US embargo and other sanctions were seeking to impoverish Cubans and destabilize the country.

Cuba's state-run news outlet early

on Monday showed posts from social media — including some from US members of Congress — about the demonstrations, and accused US-based agitators of seeking to confuse the situation or stoke anger by suggesting government repression or protests were more widespread than was actually the case.

"Mediocre politicians and networked terrorists lined up from South Florida to heat up the streets of #Cuba with interventionist messages and calls for chaos. They were left wanting," Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said on X.

The government said it expected blackouts to remain acute through the week, with electricity generation meeting only around two-thirds of demand.

China firmly supports the party and government of Cuba in improving people's lives and will continue to provide assistance for Cuba to overcome the current difficulties, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said on Monday.

Lin made the remarks at a regular news briefing when answering a relevant query.

"I wish to point out that the long-standing blockade from the US against Cuba inflicted severe difficulties on Cuba's national development and people's life," Lin said, noting that China calls on the US to immediately lift its blockade and sanctions on Cuba and stop all attempts of intervention.

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WORLD

Catastrophic famine looms in Gaza

Aid agencies call for truce as hunger warnings mount

By JAN YUMUL in Hong Kong
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Multiple international humanitarian agencies have warned of looming catastrophic famine and food insecurity in Gaza amid slow aid delivery, underscoring the need for unimpeded critical supplies through land routes as Israel's retaliatory bombardment continued.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said outside the Security Council in New York on Monday that Palestinians in Gaza were enduring "horrifying levels of hunger and suffering".

He called on the Israeli authorities to ensure complete and unfettered access to humanitarian goods throughout Gaza and for the international community to fully support the UN's humanitarian efforts.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, said on Monday that before the crisis, there "was enough food in Gaza to feed the population".

"Malnutrition was a rare occurrence. Now, people are dying, and many more are sick. Over a million people are expected to face catastrophic hunger unless significantly more food is allowed to enter Gaza," he said.

High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell on Monday said that Israel's military campaign had turned Gaza from the world's "greatest open-air prison" into its biggest "open-air graveyard".

He hoped that the EU ministers would discuss and review the bloc's joint position on the situation.

Other organizations, including Oxfam, said in a statement that "we cannot wait for a declaration of famine to stop these appalling atrocities and massively scale up humanitarian operations".



Palestinians gather to receive aid outside a warehouse as people face crisis levels of hunger, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza City on Monday. MAHMOUD ISSA / REUTERS

The statement also called for an immediate permanent cease-fire and a political solution, including "ending the occupation and release of all hostages and illegally held prisoners".

Philippe Lazzarini, commissioner-general of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, lamented on his X account on Monday that Israeli authorities had denied his entry into Gaza.

"This human-made starvation under our watch is a stain on our collective humanity. ... Famine can be averted with political will," said Lazzarini.

On March 12, the Spanish vessel *Open Arms* left Cyprus with a United Arab Emirates-funded shipment of some 200 metric tons of flour, protein and rice. The cargo, organized by the United States charity World Central Kitchen, was offloaded in Gaza, the Arab News reported.

The US, since the start of March, and with some help from Jordanian forces, had also conducted the airdrops of humanitarian aid into Gaza.

Prioritize cease-fire

But on March 14, 25 nongovernmental organizations called on governments to prioritize cease-fire and ground-based humanitarian aid, saying that the States "cannot hide behind airdrops and efforts to open a maritime corridor to create the illusion that they are doing enough to support the needs in Gaza".

They said the primary responsibility was to prevent atrocities from unfolding.

"Even if trucks are allowed to enter, the number per day is minimal, insufficient to meet the needs of 2.3 million Gaza residents. From South to North Gaza, aid truck convoys were also blocked by Israel so that aid workers could not

distribute the food. Israel also carried out attacks on aid workers and humanitarian facilities, including the UN agency," Dina Yulianti Sulaeman, director of the Indonesia Center for Middle East Studies, told China Daily.

"The only solution is to open the land borders so that trucks can bring as much help as possible," she added.

According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, report released on Monday, its acute food insecurity analysis conducted in December warned of a risk that famine may occur by the end of May if hostilities continued. The analysis also noted that half of the population of the Gaza Strip, or 1.1 million people, is expected to face catastrophic conditions, the most severe level on the IPC Acute Food Insecurity scale.

Guterres described the IPC report as an "appalling indictment of conditions on the ground for civilians".

"At the side of the camps, at the side of the roads, there are piles of used papers, plastic, tins, remnants of food, etc."

The dire sanitation situation in Rafah and elsewhere in the Gaza Strip has already resulted in a spike in hepatitis A, a liver inflammation caused by a virus that spreads via feces. It is not usually fatal.

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned in January there had been 24 confirmed cases as well as "several thousand people with jaundice, presumably also due to hepatitis A".

Other diseases could thrive as the situation deteriorates, he said.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Sewage contamination threatens Palestinians' health

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Putrid rubbish piles and sewage-contaminated puddles are increasingly encroaching on the makeshift encampments of displaced Palestinians in southern Gaza, compounding the health risks facing people who have fled Israel's attacks.

"We suffer from foul smells and illnesses among children, who are always suffering from colds," said Sayed Rafik Abu Shanab, who lives in the southern city of Rafah, where the majority of Gazans have sought refuge from the conflict.

"The sewers here are infested with mosquitoes, which bite people and transfer infections to others."

While the United Nations warns of imminent famine, after more than five months of conflict between Isra-

el and Hamas militants, humanitarian officials say fast-deteriorating sanitation conditions are making Gazans even more vulnerable.

"Sanitation is one of the key drivers for the nutritional crisis, the health crisis, and I would even say food insecurity as well," Jamie McGoldrick, UN humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinian territories, told a news briefing on Monday.

Weak immune systems

"People are hungry but they're even more hungry because ... their immune systems are being affected by their living conditions. People are living in very squalid, overcrowded conditions."

The conflict in Gaza was triggered by Hamas' Oct 7 attack on southern

Israel, which resulted in around 1,160 deaths in Israel, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures.

Israel's retaliatory military campaign in Gaza, aimed at destroying Hamas, has killed at least 31,726 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

In Rafah, where the UN says the population has ballooned from around 300,000 to 1.5 million since October as civilians fled the fighting, survivors eke out a grim existence as they wait for a possible truce, dodging ever-growing mounds of rubbish during their daily hunt for food.

"There is no garbage collection," McGoldrick said.

Licenses of 2 senior doctors suspended over walkouts

SEOUL — South Korean authorities have suspended the licenses of two senior doctors for allegedly inciting the weeklong walkouts by thousands of medical interns and residents that have disrupted hospital operations, one of the doctors said on Monday.

The suspensions are the government's first punitive steps against physicians after doctors-in-training walked off the job last month to protest the government's plan to sharply increase medical school admissions.

Officials say the recruitment plan is aimed at adding more doctors to prepare for South Korea's rapidly aging population in a country whose doctor-to-population ratio is one of the lowest in the developed world. But doctors say that schools can't handle an abrupt, steep increase in students, and that it would ultimately undermine the country's medical services.

In early March, the government began taking steps to suspend the licenses of striking junior doctors after they refused its orders to return to work by the end of February. Police are separately investigating five senior members of the Korean Medical Association, or KMA, which represents

doctors in South Korea, for allegedly inciting and abetting the strikes.

Park Myung-ha, one of the five members, said he received a government letter saying his license would be suspended for three months from April 15. Park, who works for the KMA's emergency committee, said committee leader Kim Taek-woo was also given a three-month suspension.

The Health Ministry said it wouldn't confirm any reported administrative steps imposed on individual doctors.

"My fellow doctors and I are really angered and appalled by the government's measure," Park told The Associated Press.

Legal steps

Park accused the government of attempting to break up the KMA emergency committee and sending a warning message to striking junior doctors. He said he and others are discussing legal steps to respond to the license suspensions.

Around 12,000 junior doctors have been off the job for a month, but none has received a license suspension. Observers have said it



Students hold placards opposing the government's medical school expansion plan at Busan University on Tuesday. YONHAP NEWS AGENCY

would take a few months to suspend all their licenses and that the government would likely end up suspending only strike leaders.

The striking junior doctors account for less than 10 percent of South Korea's 140,000 doctors. But in some major hospitals, they represent about 30 percent to 40 percent of the doctors, assisting senior doctors during surgeries and dealing with inpatients during training.

Their strikes have caused hundreds of canceled or postponed sur-

geries and other treatments, but officials say the country's handling of emergency and critical patients largely remains stable.

Senior doctors at major university hospitals recently decided to submit resignations next week in support of the junior doctors. Still, most of them will likely continue to report to work. If they walk off the job, that would burden South Korea's medical services severely.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Supreme Court lets Texas arrest migrants

By MAYZHOU in Houston
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The US Supreme Court, denying a request from the Department of Justice, gave Texas the green light Tuesday to enforce a new state law that empowers state law enforcement to jail and prosecute migrants crossing the border illegally.

Senate Bill 4 (SB4) would make illegal crossing from Mexico a crime with punishment between six months to up to 20 years for first time and repeat offenders. It would allow Texas to arrest any undocumented immigrants in the state.

The Biden administration has challenged it as an unconstitutional infringement on the federal government's power to set and enforce immigration law.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, briefly responded to the court ruling on social media, calling it "clearly a positive development".

A federal judge in Austin blocked SB4 in February, but was overturned by the US Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit. The Supreme Court temporarily suspended the 5th Circuit decision but now has lifted that injunction to return the case to the appeals court to consider the law's legality and issue a prompt ruling on whether the law should be paused.

The Supreme Court did not express a view on the constitutionality of the Texas law. Justice Amy Coney Barrett, joined by Justice Brett Kavanaugh, filed a concurring opinion that the high court has never reviewed the decision of an appeals court on administrative stay.

"If a decision does not issue soon, the applicants may return to this court," Barrett wrote.

The court's three liberal members, Justices Ketanji Brown Jackson, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor dissented.

"The Court gives a green light to a law that will upend the longstanding federal-state balance of power and sow chaos, when the only court to consider the law concluded that it is likely unconstitutional," Sotomayor wrote in a dissenting opinion that was joined by Jackson.

Sotomayor accused the 5th Circuit of abusing its discretion, saying it entered an unreasoned and indefinite administrative stay that altered the status quo. She argued that the 5th Circuit should've considered the constitutionality of the law and harm caused by it before allowing it to take effect.

Sotomayor wrote that the appeals court "opened the door to profound disruption. This Court makes the same mistake".

Abbott has said that SB4 is necessary to discourage illegal migration and accused the US government of not deterring illegal immigration.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton called the court's action a "HUGE WIN".

"Texas has defeated the Biden Administration's and ACLU's emergency motions at the Supreme Court," he wrote on X.

The White House called SB4 unconstitutional, saying it was "just another example of Republican officials politicizing the border while blocking real solutions".

In a news conference on Tuesday afternoon, Domingo Garcia, national president of The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), said the law is unconstitutional. "It's un-Christian, immoral, and un-Texan" and would "result in large scale racial profiling" and "civil rights violations".

"If you're in a rural part of Texas, a suburban part of Texas, the fact that you look Hispanic, you look Asian, you look African American — you may be (mistaken as being) from Haiti, that (law is) going to be used as a pretext to stop people and search their vehicles and detain people," said Garcia.

"This could lead to 'abuses' and 'tragedies'," he said, adding that he could see tragic things happening when police officers try to enforce immigration laws and people might fight back because they feel they're being singled out due to their looks.

Garcia said LULAC will launch a statewide Know Your Rights program to educate people that they have a right to the Fifth Amendment, to bail and to an attorney.

The organization will look at "creating a hot line with volunteer attorneys and paralegals to assist anybody calling regarding if they felt that their civil rights were violated or if they were illegally detained or held over".

"We know that every history has shown us that whenever you start scapegoating the other, you start discriminating against the other," he said.

Garcia said that many border sheriffs are furious about the law because enforcing it will burden local government beyond tax dollars.

"Those tax dollars are going to be used to basically arrest individuals who are coming here to be somebody's nanny or work in somebody's yard or working some meat packing plant. Their jails are going to be filled up. Their courtrooms are going to be filled up."

Gunmen in Nigeria kidnap around 100 over weekend

KADUNA, Nigeria — Gunmen in Nigeria kidnapped around 100 people, including women and children, in two-weekend attacks in Kaduna state, residents and police said on Monday.

Kidnappings by criminal gangs demanding ransoms have become an almost daily occurrence in Nigeria, especially in the north.

President Bola Tinubu, elected to lead the country of more than 210 million people last year, has ruled out the payment of ransoms in the operation to free the children.

Tinubu's government did not immediately comment on the latest attacks.

Kaduna police spokesman Mansur Hassan confirmed the incident in Kajuru Station village on Sunday night but could not give an exact figure on those missing, but said security agents had been deployed to rescue the villagers.

Tanko Wada Sarkin, a village head, said 87 people were taken and told Reuters: "We have so far recorded the return of five people back home who fled through the bush. This attack makes it five times that these bandits are attacking this community."

Residents said armed men dressed in army uniforms arrived in the village undetected because they had parked their motorbikes away from the village.

Aruwa Ya'u, another resident, said he was captured but released by the gunmen because he struggled to walk due to poor health. He

was receiving treatment at a local government clinic, he said.

Gunmen are known to force-march their victims deep into the bush, holding them for as long as several months while awaiting ransom payments.

The abductions come after an armed gang seized 286 students and staff from a school in early March in Kuriga in Kaduna state, while in another incident gunmen seized 61 people on March 12 in Buda community.

In Dagon Noma, another community in Kajuru local government area, gunmen abducted 16 people from their homes in an attack on Saturday night, residents said.

Local resident Daniel Shamang said they had not heard anything from the abductors or the missing villagers.

Kidnappings at schools in Nigeria were first carried out by the extremist group Boko Haram, who seized more than 200 students from a girls' school in Chibok in Borno state a decade ago.

But the tactic has since been adopted by criminal gangs without any ideological affiliation seeking ransom payments.

The kidnappings are tearing apart families and communities who have to pool their savings to pay the ransoms, often forcing them to sell prized possessions like land, cattle and grain to secure the release of captured loved ones.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

BUSINESS

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Appliance upgrades to provide big stimulus

By FAN FEIFEI
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China's latest efforts to promote the large-scale renewal of equipment and the trading-in of consumer goods — especially household appliances or white goods — will further stimulate consumer spending appetites, bolster consumption recovery and inject new momentum into economic growth, said industry experts and company executives.

Their comments came as the State Council, China's Cabinet, released an action plan last week encouraging the replacement of aging and outdated household appliances with new ones, and offering subsidies to consumers who buy green and intelligent home appliances in areas where conditions permit. As of 2027, the recycling volume of used household appliances will increase by 30 percent compared with 2023, according to the plan.

The latest policy measures aimed at boosting trade-ins of consumer goods will effectively stimulate purchasing enthusiasm among consumers for home appliances, and bolster the transformation and upgrade of the traditional white goods sector, said Zhou Yunjie, chairman and CEO of Chinese home appliances giant Haier Group.

As Chinese consumers are exhibiting increasing preference for intelligent and green home appliances amid the rapid development and application of artificial intelligence technology, domestic white goods manufacturers are accelerating their layouts in AI and chips, which will be conducive to promoting technological advancement of the whole industry, Zhou said.

The Qingdao, Shandong province-based home appliances man-



A shopper (right) seeks information on products displayed at a home appliance sales promotion event in Qingzhou, Shandong province. WANG JILIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

ufacturer is stepping up efforts to recycle old white goods, with about 2 million units of such products dismantled and 30,000 metric tons of materials recycled each year.

"Large-scale equipment renewals and consumer goods trade-ins represent a key direction for boosting circular economy development, and are of great significance to accelerate the formation of green production and lifestyles," said Jia Shaoqian, chairman of Chinese home appliance manufacturer Hisense Group.

Jia called for more efforts to cultivate consumer awareness of standardized recycling and disposal of discarded appliances, and establish management mechanisms and industry standards for recycling, circulation and dismantling of electronic product waste.

Looking ahead, Hisense will step up the push to establish online and offline recycling and disposal channels for discarded home appliances, as well as provide discounts and subsidies to consumers who are willing to replace old appliances with energy-saving and intelligent

alternatives, the company said.

Data from the Ministry of Commerce showed that as of the end of 2023, the number of household appliances in major categories such as refrigerators, washing machines and air conditioners had exceeded 3 billion units, which presents huge potential for renewal and replacement.

Pei Dongmin, deputy general manager of the home appliance business unit at Beijing-based market consultancy All View Cloud, said, "The new trade-in measures will not only unleash consumption demand for home appliances and bolster stable growth of the home appliances sector, but also give a boost to technological and product upgrades in emerging categories, and the green and smart transformation of industries."

According to AVC, sales in China's white goods sector reached 849.8 billion yuan (\$118.0 billion) in 2023, up 3.6 percent year-on-year.

Gree Electric Appliances, another home appliances manufacturer, based in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, said the move will further spur consumption and help enrich appli-

cation scenarios of new technologies.

The company has built six recycling bases for discarded home appliances and more than 30,000 offline sites. By the end of 2023, Gree had recycled, dismantled and otherwise handled 56 million units of discarded electronic products, recycled 850,000 tons of metals such as copper, iron and aluminum, and reduced carbon emissions by 2.8 million tons.

Liu Buchen, an independent researcher tracking the home appliances sector, said that currently, the country's recycling system for such products has made great progress, but public awareness has not kept up and there is a large number of unwanted home appliances that have not made their way to regular recycling channels.

Moreover, consumers need to get additional support to exchange old home appliances and electronics for more green and intelligent alternatives, while Chinese home appliance enterprises should expand recycling channels and drive the popularization of energy-saving products, Liu said.

Mainland shares getting back on track

For foreign investors, China is 'one of the best performing equity markets'

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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61 billion yuan volume of the monthly northbound capital inflow in February, a 12-month high

Foreign investors' rising interest in Chinese mainland equities — their exposure to A shares has increased recently — can be attributed to the obvious value of the stocks and China's continued efforts to optimize its capital market structure, said market mavens and experts.

Their comments came amid continued capital inflows from foreign investors. As of Tuesday, northbound capital — the amount of funds used by overseas investors to buy A shares via the stock connect program linking the Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hong Kong bourses — reported net capital inflows of nearly 35 billion yuan (\$4.9 billion) so far this year. The figure is fast approaching the 2023 whole-year number of 43.7 billion yuan.

The monthly northbound capital inflow hit a 12-month high of nearly 61 billion yuan in February. Some 24 A-share companies have seen foreign investors purchasing more than 20 million shares in each of them since the beginning of February, taking the latter's shareholding in each to 5 percent.

Semiconductor display manufacturer BOE Technology Group Co Ltd attracted the most attention as foreign investors increased their exposure by a whopping 462 million shares, representing a 1.4 percent stake, in less than two months.

Experts expect the trend will continue in the following months, especially after FTSE Russell, the London-based index provider tracked by a large number of passive funds, added 76 A-share companies to its FTSE Russell Global Equity Index Series on Monday.

The adjustment, based on FTSE Russell's first-quarter adjustment, will bring in 5 billion yuan in additional capital into the A-share market, elevating passive funds' interest and trading activity, said Guo Feng, chief investment adviser at Northeast Securities.

The A-share market has added appeal for foreign investors now as expectations for supportive policies and China's economic recovery are improving. Companies providing higher dividends and technology-driven growth enterprises will be the two investment themes, said Guo.

Tian Lihui, director of the Institute of Finance and Development at Nankai University, said industry leaders in electronics, biomedicine and computers make up the most of FTSE Russell's latest adjustment. This reflects that international investors are attaching greater importance to China's emerging industries as the country advances its economic restructuring. It also shows their

recognition of China's ongoing capital market reform and development, he said.

Ronald Temple, Lazard's chief market strategist, said he believes increasing allocation to China makes sense now as it will be "one of the best performing equity markets as a trade over the next 12 to 18 months".

Indeed, outflows from Chinese equities slowed toward the end of February and regional fund managers started to add growth and tech stocks to their portfolios, wrote Morgan Stanley strategists, including Gilbert Wong and Laura Wang, in a March note on positions by long-only funds.

This may be considered an early sign that money managers are rethinking their asset allocations across Asia, helping China to regain its luster in global portfolios, they said.

Kinger Lau, chief China equity strategist at Goldman Sachs, said that overseas investors' interest in the Chinese equities market has picked up, especially after the two sessions. They expect more supportive macroeconomic, industry or capital market policies, which would help improve A-share companies' profitability, he said.

As estimated by Lau's team, the CSI 300 index, comprising A-share large-caps, will spike 19 percent year-on-year while the MSCI China Index, which tracks Chinese equities more extensively, will likely surge 17 percent this year. Improving profitability and recovery in market valuations are the two major drivers, according to Goldman Sachs analysts.

Meng Lei, China equity strategist at UBS Securities, also expressed positive outlook on the A-share market performance this year. The average profitability of A-share companies will increase 8 percent year-on-year this year, up from 5 percent last year. The increase in China's nominal GDP, the recovery in the producer price index, combined with moderately relaxed fiscal and monetary policies (including the credit policy), will drive the A-share market from now on.

State-owned enterprises may not only serve as a major theme this year but also are worth long-term attention as the central regulators stipulate higher requirements on their market valuation management. Most SOEs are undervalued at present, which indicates more long-term capital inflows, Meng said.

Briefly

PBOC adds liquidity via reverse repos

China's central bank conducted 5 billion yuan (\$704.4 million) in seven-day reverse repos at an interest rate of 1.8 percent on Tuesday. The move aims to keep liquidity in the banking system reasonable and ample, the People's Bank of China said in a statement. A reverse repo is a process in which the central bank purchases securities from commercial banks through bidding, with an agreement to sell them back in the future.

Hebei sees Jan-Feb foreign trade growth

North China's Hebei province posted steady foreign trade growth in the first two months, said Shijiazhuang Customs. Hebei's total imports and exports grew 14.7 percent year-on-year to 97 billion yuan (\$13.66 billion) during the period. Exports hit 54.19 billion yuan, marking a 20.7 percent increase, while imports edged up 7.9 percent to 42.81 billion yuan.

XINHUA — CHINA DAILY

Belmond riding tourism resurgence

By ZHU WENQIAN
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Belmond, a luxury travel brand under the umbrella of French luxury giant LVMH, said it has seen a growing volume of bookings globally from Chinese guests, and it is bullish on increasingly diversified demand from the world's second-largest economy.

Last year, Belmond saw the number of bookings via Chinese travel agencies jump 15 percent over pre-COVID-19 levels seen in 2019, said Nicolas Streff, Belmond's vice-president of strategy and corporate communication, during a visit to China this week — his first to the country since the pandemic.

Belmond does not operate any hotels in China yet, but its properties worldwide have been patronized by Chinese consumers who have been pursuing high-end and unique experiences, including young couples on honeymoons or holding weddings, and well-to-do family travelers.

Some hotels that have seen a large number of bookings from Chinese travelers include those in Brazil and Italy — as well as safari-takers in



Nicolas Streff

Botswana — alongside passengers on the Eastern and Oriental Express, a Belmond train travel product that returned to the rails in Southeast Asia in February.

Belmond said that in the post-pandemic period, it found Chinese travelers stayed longer at hotels, had more diversified requests and sought more unique adventures.

Meanwhile, Belmond has seen more European travelers rediscovering Europe after the pandemic, and saw a surge in its train travel business in Europe.

"We are at the very beginning of the journey for Belmond China. We have launched an official account on WeChat, and a few other projects are in the pipeline; it's our first chapter. We are going to take the time we need to understand better what Chinese travelers expect from a brand like Belmond," Streff said.

He said he believes there are business growth opportunities in China, given the country's rich heritage,

culture and traditions, as well as its ability to look forward to the future, which is very contemporary and in line with Belmond. The brand would like to cooperate with more travel agencies and other industry players in China.

For the latest luxury consumption trends, Chinese consumers have indicated a desire for more tailored services and experiential luxury products, as well as digitalized experiences, Streff said.

Chinese travelers have indicated an increasingly growing enthusiasm for traveling abroad, fueled by a steady recovery of international flights and the implementation of visa-free policies for Chinese visitors in multiple countries.

During Spring Festival this year, passenger trips taken abroad have approached levels recorded in the same period of 2019, said the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

This year, the number of outbound tourists is expected to reach 130 million passenger trips, and the inbound tourism market for Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan is expected to achieve a comprehensive recovery, said the China Tourism Academy.

CNOOC oilfield discovery to help hike offshore output

By ZHENG XIN
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China National Offshore Oil Corp's announcement of a major oilfield discovery in the Bohai Sea is expected to add over 100 million metric tons of oil equivalent, and further develop offshore oil and gas resources in the country, industry experts said.

CNOOC announced on Monday the discovery of Qinhuangdao 27-3 oilfield, which is located in the north-central waters of the Bohai Sea.

The proved in-place volume of the oilfield has reached 104 million tons of oil equivalent through continu-

ous exploration, it said.

"Qinhuangdao 27-3 oilfield is another major discovery with proved in-place volume of over 100 million tons that we made in the north-central Bohai Sea in a decade," said Xu Changgui, deputy chief exploration officer of CNOOC.

"The successful discovery of the oilfield further demonstrates the oil and gas exploration potential in the complicated strike-slip fault zones of the Bohai Sea."

According to CNOOC, the field has been tested to produce about 742 barrels of crude oil per day from a single well.

The discovery well QHD27-3-3 was drilled and completed at a

depth of 1,570 meters, which encountered a total of 48.9 meters of oil pay zones, it said.

Investment in offshore oil and gas exploration is expected to rise further, with more than half of this year's domestic oil increment likely to come from offshore sources, said Li Ziyue, an analyst with BloombergNEF.

China's offshore oil and gas production is expected to further increase in 2024, she added.

The nation's investment in offshore oil production rose last year, with key development projects and offshore oil and gas production reaching new highs, said Wang Zhen, head of the CNOOC Energy

Economics Institute.

China's continuous commitment toward upstream investment and production has played a critical role in the country's energy security.

According to China Offshore Oil Engineering Co Ltd, the nation's leading offshore contractor, its revenue last year hit a record high of more than 30.75 billion yuan (\$4.27 billion), as the company accelerated domestic production while expanding its foreign market share.

Net profit rose to 1.91 billion yuan, compared with 1.45 billion yuan in 2022, a record high in seven years, it said.

According to Zhou Xinhui, CEO and president of CNOOC Ltd, the



Employees work on a smart offshore oil project in Tianjin. DU PENGHUI / XINHUA

company has been making new discoveries in the Bohai Sea, which has further expanded the resource base for growth in offshore oil production. CNOOC will focus on increasing

reserves and production to enhance China's energy supply capacity, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of the economy and society, Zhou said.

BUSINESS



A visitor checks out home furnishing products at the IKEA booth during the sixth China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

IKEA banks on high-tech in China

Furnishing giant plans smaller store formats to expand local presence

By WANG ZHUOQIONG
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Global furnishings and housewares giant IKEA is investing in automation, robotics and other technologies to help lower operational costs and continuously reduce product prices, while adding more convenience-centric stores in China's urban centers, said the Swedish company.

During a visit to China this month, Tolga Oncu, Ingka Retail Manager of Ingka Group — which brings IKEA retail operations to more than 30 markets — stressed the importance of siding with the many amid global economic challenges by offering affordable products and solutions.

In February, the company announced it would invest more than 100 million yuan (\$13.9 mil-

lion) in more than 500 products on offer in China this fiscal year. By offering more lower-priced products, IKEA is expected to inject new vitality into the local furnishings and housewares market and showcase its long-term commitment in China, the company said.

"How we do it is not a secret," said Oncu. "It's by growing our business, taking the economy of scale benefits and lowering operational costs by investing in automation, robotics and other technologies."

In addition, IKEA is continuing to invest 6.3 billion yuan over the next three fiscal years in professional home solutions, personalized services and omni-channel approaches in China, he added.

When it comes to the new formats, the mega-retailer is rolling out plans to introduce newer and smaller store formats, catering to the convenience of urbanites and increasing its presence in key cities, Oncu said.

"By developing newer and smaller formats, actually the opportunity for IKEA to be more present where many people are living or working

or socializing is increasing dramatically," he added.

The company will be opening the first Plan & Order Point on the Chinese mainland — in Shenzhen, Guangdong province — to discover how to become more convenient in the offline world.

In terms of digitalization, China is more advanced with emerging technologies, which have been widely applied in diverse consumption scenarios, Oncu said.

"It's maybe more for us to come and learn rather than the opposite. We always say when we travel to China that we travel into the future because what happens here today will most probably happen tomorrow in the rest of the world."

On housewares sector trends globally, Oncu said IKEA has adopted proactive approaches to understand consumer needs through in-depth home visits, with findings — including the importance of storage and solutions — to improve living experiences.

In addition to functional needs, Chinese consumers exhibit growing demand for products and brands

that can provide a relaxing, warm and healing emotional experience, with sustainability being a key factor when making buying decisions, said the company.

For example, it is a lot about storage and organization, especially in more densely populated cities in China where space is limited, he said.

Therefore, it is very important for Chinese homes to find storage solutions at an affordable price. For example, when it comes to the growing trend of working out from home, the solution is not to turn the home into a gym.

"It should still be a very cozy home, but then you need solutions to pull out, use your equipment and store it when you are finished," he said, adding that with cooking at home now as a big trend requiring more food storage, containers made of glass can enable people to see how much they have at home before they order more food.

Ingka Group operates 34 stores, two experience centers and eight Livat facilities on the Chinese mainland.

Guangdong expects job market stability this year

By QIU QUANLIN in Guangzhou
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A resurgence in overseas orders and increased demand for workers in manufacturing and cross-border e-commerce will stabilize the job market in Guangdong province, companies and local authorities said during an employment fair.

"We have expanded the scale of worker reserves as the company's production increased by 10 percent to 20 percent in the past two months," said a human resources manager surnamed Wu of Zhuhai Gree Electric Enterprise Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of home appliances giant Gree Electric Appliances Inc.

The Zhuhai, Guangdong province-based company, which is mainly engaged in the production and sale of products such as electromagnetic wire and its components, plans to recruit more than 100 employees, Wu said.

At the job fair held in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong, the company said it will offer equipment operators, mechanical and electrical technicians, with average salaries ranging from 5,500 (\$763.95) to 7,000 yuan per month. The company said it will also provide free dormitories.

The job fair was held simultaneously in the cities of Guangzhou and Dongguan, a major manufacturing and trade base in Guangdong, on Sunday. The fair offered more than 70,000 positions from 1,300 companies.

In addition to Gree, more than 400 manufacturing enterprises that are mainly engaged in mechanical, electronic and food manufacturing participated in the job fair, with potential technical positions accounting for



Job seekers visit a job fair in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, on Sunday. LIANG JUCONG / NANFANG DAILY

about 45 percent of total jobs, according to the organizers.

"We had a relatively sufficient number of product orders in the first quarter of this year and need to fill the labor gap," said Yin Meiyang, a senior manager of Guangdong Xinhao Electrical Appliances Holdings Co Ltd.

The company, an A-share listed firm based in Foshan, Guangdong, plans to recruit 50-60 employees, covering positions related to technology and management, Yin said.

Guangzhou Mino Equipment Co Ltd, a high-tech enterprise focusing on providing intelligent manufacturing solutions for the automotive manufacturing industry, has developed a significant demand for technicians in overseas markets as its output value is expected to increase by around 50 percent this year.

"The scale of employment is expected to grow by 10-15 percent compared to last year, leading to a

labor gap of 160 to 200 people," said Luo Lei, general manager of the production and manufacturing center of Mino.

With industrial upgrading and increased demand from overseas markets, the company will pay more attention to employees' problem-solving abilities and will have higher requirements for comprehensive qualities such as skill levels and proficiency in foreign languages, according to Luo.

Talented people in cross-border e-commerce were also highly sought-after at the job fair, with high demand for professionals with expertise in languages such as Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian and Japanese.

At the fair, Guangdong Soxii Intelligent Equipment Co Ltd sought professionals majoring in foreign languages, as its business has expanded to emerging markets in Vietnam, Thailand, Spain as well as other countries and regions.

'Precision management' provides cherry on top for Henan farmers

By LI JIAYING
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Within an array of greenhouses in Tianxing ecological park, Xin'an county, Henan province, rows of cherry trees nestled in pots are bearing clusters of ripe, luscious fruit. Against a backdrop of lush green leaves, the cherries glisten in the generous beams of sunshine — a testament to the meticulous care they receive.

"These are our carefully cultivated potted cherries, developed over three years and encompassing five distinct varieties," said Liu Xiankuan, head of the park.

"They have already been pre-ordered by customers from Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing, showing promising returns," Liu said.

Traditionally, cherries grown in North China are not widely available until May. As a natural cultivation area for Chinese cherries, Xin'an has pioneered innovative growing methods, integrating new technologies to transition from "traditional management" to "precision management". The cherries grown in the greenhouses have matured ahead of schedule, boasting vibrant colors, large sizes and sought-after sweetness since February.

Reliable power supplies are considered a crucial factor in propelling the transformation and upgrading of traditional agriculture.

"Empowering industry and enriching the people start with reliable electricity resources. We have established a special team to enhance the business environ-

ment, actively engaging with distinctive industry projects, monitoring progress in real-time and tailoring our electricity supplies to meet evolving needs so as to enhance the quality of rural power grids, serve the county's economic development and empower rural vitalization," said Guo Xiaojing, general manager of the Xin'an branch at State Grid Corp of China.

Focusing on the cherry sector's growth, the power supplier has tailored its services, engaging with the county, towns and villages to understand industry development plans and electricity needs, Guo said.

As a result, more and more cherry growers have been attracted by the potential for increased incomes and prosperity. By constructing smart greenhouse facilities and implementing integrated water and fertilizer management, farmers are finely controlling the growth cycles of their cherry assets.

This precision management allows for staggered cherry harvests, extending the selling season and boosting economic returns. The "red fruit" has now also been transformed into a "golden fruit" of prosperity for farmers in the region.

"Leveraging our abundant and reliable power supplies, we utilize an electrification system coupled with temperature control technology to manage the cherry trees' growth cycle," said Liu.

"This advancement has significantly accelerated the cherry maturation process, allowing buyers to enjoy the delicious fruit in early spring."

Novo Nordisk to invest 4b yuan in Tianjin unit

By YANG CHENG in Tianjin
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Novo Nordisk said on Tuesday that it will invest about 4 billion yuan (\$555.7 million) to expand its existing production site in Tianjin, marking a major move in the country for the Denmark-based pharmaceutical company.

This follows a prior 1.18 billion yuan investment in finished production and pre-filled lines in the Tianjin Economic and Technological Development Area during the first quarter of 2023, signifying its continued commitment to growth and innovation in the region.

Lars Arnoldsen, corporate vice-president of Novo Nordisk, said, "With the expansion project, we'll be able to further increase manufacturing capability to support the localization of more innovative medicines, delivering the highest quality to patients."

The expansion project encompasses the development of a state-of-the-art filling facility equipped with isolator technology and is slated for completion in 2027.

Christine Zhou, the company's global senior vice-president and president of the China region, said: "The significance of 2024 is Novo Nordisk's 30th anniversary of successful operations in China.

Tianjin holds a special place in the company's history as its initial foothold in the country."

Zhou said further, "We will advance the process of drug localization while contributing to the goals of Healthy China 2030."

The company, Zhou said, is confident about further investments in China, and cited "the nation's determination and commitment to openness, as well as the government's initiatives to enhance public health" as the key reasons.

Lian Maojun, Party chief of Binhai New Area in Tianjin, where Novo Nordisk's key site is located, highlighted the area's commitment to providing comprehensive support to foreign companies.

"The provision of tailored and expert-style services, policy innovations, and support for cross-border production aid the takeoff of foreign companies," Lian said.

Novo Nordisk's sales in China surged to \$2.4 billion last year, marking an 11 percent year-on-year increase.

The International Diabetes Federation reported that China's diabetes patients accounted for a quarter of the global total, reaching 141 million last year.

Global diabetes cases are projected to triple by 2050, reaching 1.31 billion individuals.

Through green fields



An aerial view of a newly built section of the Liangyungang-Suqian Expressway in Jiangsu province. With State-owned enterprises taking the lead, China has seen accelerated progress in expressway and highway construction nationwide since the beginning of the year, such as the Shanghai-Chongqing Expressway extension project undertaken by China Railway 24th Bureau Group Corp. The first prefabricated box girder of the project has been completed, the SOE said. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

BUSINESSFOCUS

CHINA UP-CLOSE

Crafted ads, reminders driving store sales

Facial recognition tech, previous buying records helping convenience shops provide customized marketing to consumers

By WANG ZHUOQIONG
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Advertising to influence consumers' shopping decisions at convenience stores can be challenging, especially when targeting Gen Z and younger shoppers.

However, one convenience store chain operator based in Fujian province, East China, believes it has found a better approach.

"When customers purchase a toothbrush, a recommendation for toothpaste appears on the screen near the counter. If they buy a piece of bread, they are shown suggestions for jams," said Zhang Li, chairman of Fook Convenience Store, a regional player that operates about 2,200 stores.

"Younger consumers in China have a strong sense of self-belief. They don't want to see another toothbrush recommendation. They prefer not to be told what to buy but appreciate gentle reminders of complementary products."

These advertisements, crafted to evoke demand and address overlooked needs, play a significant role in influencing buying behavior, Zhang said.

His convenience store chain, Fook — a privately owned company — operates across three provinces, namely Fujian, Jiangxi and Sichuan.

In collaboration with technology firm Zkdigimax, Fook has developed an algorithm based on facial recognition technology and previous shopping records to predict customers' potential requirements.

Recommendations for personalized items are then displayed on the screen near the counter to align closely with customers' anticipated purchases.

"The impact of associative advertising has been remarkable," Zhang said. "It represents a major breakthrough in the convenience store industry, positioning us at the forefront."

Zhang said that younger consumers in China gravitate toward emotional and individualistic consumption, placing a premium on convenience.

Understanding their shopping behaviors and managing their expectations are critical for the future viability of convenience stores, he added.

"We are not dictating what they should buy, which can be off-putting for young consumers. Instead, we aim to enhance their shopping experience by offering tailored recommendations. We simply awaken their hidden needs and remind them of what they may have wanted but forgotten in that moment," Zhang said.

The technology currently relies on data from Fook's stores and is still in development to improve the



A consumer shops at an automated self-service FamilyMart store in Shanghai in June 2022. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

accuracy of estimations and advertising, he said.

Despite stagnant expansion in scale, the company in fiscal year 2023 achieved a 10 percent growth in revenue compared to the previous year. Profits have seen a slight increase, thanks to intense competition that has driven aggressive price promotions.

Zhang said that the decline of hypermarkets nationwide has bolstered the performance of community convenience stores, which, compared to their advanced counterparts in Japan, still hold significant potential.

Fook was among the sector's outperformers last year. Compared to the prior year, 2023 witnessed an overall upswing in sector sales, with 81.4 percent of convenience store enterprises reporting year-on-year growth in total sales, while 16.9 percent experienced declines, according to a survey conducted by the China Chain Store & Franchise Association.

The survey was based on the performance of 59 convenience store enterprises in 2023, spanning 110,638 venues.

Moreover, the industry saw a steady expansion in store numbers, with 13,148 new stores opening, offsetting the closure of 4,076 outlets and resulting in a net increase of 9,072 stores, said the survey.

The highlight of the survey is the accelerated pace at which top

enterprises, boasting over 1,500 stores, expanded their footprint, accounting for nearly 80 percent of the net increase.

For example, the Lawson convenience store chain is expanding into Shandong province, with plans to open about 1,000 stores in the area this year.

Over the next few years, Lawson is expected to join forces with local powerhouse brand Ykym Mart, leveraging the latter's local market experience to unleash the potential of Lawson's brand and supply chain advantages, thus jointly propelling Lawson's rapid development in the region.

In 2023, Lawson China's operating income increased 11.9 percent year-on-year and net profit surged 94.2 percent.

Meanwhile, convenience chain giant FamilyMart announced a significant expansion in the country by further collaborating with its Chinese partner, Ting Hsin International Group.

The two sides will establish a new joint venture to oversee operations in East China, while Ting Hsin will take charge of FamilyMart stores in other regions, reaffirming Tokyo-based FamilyMart's ownership of the brand. The move is to foster continued collaboration and actively propel FamilyMart's growth across the Chinese mainland.

The number of FamilyMart stores



A view of a Lawson convenience store at a subway station in Shanghai in August 2022. FAN JIANLEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

on the mainland surged 15.4 percent from 2019 to 2021, reaching 2,967 outlets, according to the China Chain Store & Franchise Association. Shanghai alone hosted nearly half of these stores, boasting 1,400 outlets.

Furthermore, the industry survey shows that there's an enhancement in store quality, reflected in 61 percent of enterprises observing a year-on-year increase in comparable store sales. A significant proportion of companies achieving total sales growth also saw a corresponding rise in comparable store sales, underscoring

a qualitative improvement.

In terms of 2023 profitability, 52.5 percent of surveyed enterprises reported a year-on-year growth in net profit, 32.2 percent experienced a decrease, with 15.3 percent maintaining stability.

Despite an overall improvement compared to 2022, companies grappling with declining profits face notable challenges, particularly those witnessing declines in visitor numbers and comparable store sales.

The data signal a positive trajectory in 2023, with a gradual uptick in visitor numbers witnessed by 55.9

"We simply awaken their hidden needs and remind them of what they may have wanted but forgotten in that moment."

Zhang Li, chairman of Fook Convenience Store

percent of surveyed enterprises. However, 37.3 percent still experienced a decline, with decreases in comparable store sales and net profit.

To gain profitability over the long term, Fook Convenience Store has placed a priority on product development and memberships to build its core strengths.

Zhang said that products in the store must offer unique value, and strategies like copying from suppliers and engaging in price wars are not sustainable methods for growth. The company has initiated efforts to work from the very source of each value chain to ensure the safety and value of its privately branded products. Thanks to industry-leading warehousing and supply chain capabilities, the company has established its own self-built fresh food factories and logistics centers.

For instance, Fook's zero-antibiotic eggs — amid concerns over antibiotic usage in some market eggs — have become a top-selling item for many consumers.

He said integrating consumers' lives into lifestyles and positioning convenience stores as hubs for all aspects of daily life within 15 minutes of their homes are key objectives.

Looking ahead to 2024, convenience store enterprises are prioritizing standardization, digitization and online expansion. A total of 71 percent of surveyed companies are opting for expansion strategies, with a focus on deepening existing market penetration, according to the survey.

Additionally, they're exploring new store formats to adapt to evolving consumer preferences.

For Fook, the catering category of the convenience store is poised to be the next growth driver for their business, currently comprising 30 percent of their product offerings, which is 10 percent higher than the industry average, but still 20 percent lower than that in Japan's convenience store sector, Zhang said.

"Our policy this year is steady growth and avoiding reckless expansion. Survival is our primary objective," Zhang added.

Discount retailers making mark among price-conscious bargain hunters

By WANG ZHUOQIONG

Product discount campaigns are emerging and showing promising development trends, becoming one of the hottest topics in the retail sector amid declining performances among hypermarkets and soaring sales in high-end membership stores, said industry experts.

Local retailers are also actively exploring and experimenting with discount stores. However, whether retail discount operations will become a strong force in China's future consumer goods and services sector remains to be seen, said Wang Hongtao, deputy secretary-general of the China Chain Store & Franchise Association.

Wang said the association has observed the significant challenges facing the supermarket industry in recent years.

In January, the CFAA conducted a survey on the overall performance of regional supermarkets in 2023, covering over 10,000 stores involving more than 40 companies. The survey found that only 41.8 percent of supermarkets achieved positive sales growth in 2023, which was a slight decrease from the 44.3 percent reported in 2022.

"The retail industry is undergoing

a period of significant transformation, with local supermarkets adopting cautious strategies such as closing unprofitable stores, slowing expansion and enhancing internal management," said Wang.

On the other hand, high-end membership stores like Sam's Club and Costco continue to open new stores in first and second-tier cities, achieving record-breaking sales per store, Wang added.

In recent years, discount stores have played an important role in retail industry trends in Japan, Europe and the United States.

Zhang Qiang, founder and CEO of Hitgoo, a retail discount chain, said in China, the next decade will also be a decade of discount store expansion. The discount store model, mainly focusing on daily necessities and foodstuffs, can be successful in the domestic market and presents certain opportunities, said Zhang.

Hitgoo plans to serve 120 million customers and achieve sales of 38 billion yuan (\$5.28 billion) in the next three years. In 2023, Hitgoo's sales reached some 8 billion yuan, and it plans to achieve sales of around 10 billion yuan by the end of 2024.

Zhang said their operational strength, store expansion capabili-

ties and supply chains have contributed to the rapid growth of Hitgoo's scale and profitability.

Currently, Hitgoo is expanding its stores through direct operation and franchising business models. There are currently over 300 stores in the north, and Hitgoo has over 400 directly operated stores nationwide. This year, Hitgoo will focus on expanding in the south, with plans to reach 1,000 stores by the end of 2024.

Lin Yongqiang, chairman of Guanpark Supermarket based in Fujian province, said their stores adopt a hard discount format, with each store having a standard operating area of 300 square meters, offering 2,000 kinds of products, focusing only on standard products, without bulk and fresh goods being prioritized.

Guanpark discount stores are more simply decorated and have low labor costs due to shortened circulation processes and restructuring of supply chain relationships, Lin said.

He said that whether hard discounts or soft discounts are on offer, ultimately, discount stores are about efficiency — who is more efficient and who is less so — in terms of supply chain efficiency

and operational efficiency.

Lin said that if retailing has value, it can create value for consumers.

"We need to adapt constantly and avoid anxiety," he said.

Chen Liping, a professor at Capital University of Economics and Business, said the notion that "all supermarkets in China should transition to discount stores" is a misconception.

"Different consumers have different preferences, and enterprises should provide appropriate quality products to meet consumer needs," Chen said.

Chen suggested that the retail industry should address issues such as the aging population, smaller households, the rise of single-person households and the loss of commercial populations in rural areas, by creating value for consumers.

"Value creation is the biggest trend in the future development of the retail sector," said Chen.

Looking at the future development of Chinese supermarkets, Chen said strategic management will become the most important factor determining the survival of enterprises.

In a market environment characterized by economic downturn, sluggish consumption and an aging



A customer checks out products at an outlet of retail discount chain Hitgoo in Shanghai in December 2022. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

demographic, retailers need to reposition their target markets and be able to understand customer needs and convert them into products that create value for customers, he said.

In an environment of a graying population and declining birth rates, product cost-effectiveness and time-cost effectiveness are basic requirements for consumers of all income levels, said Chen.

While food discount stores are developing rapidly, value-oriented supermarkets will become the mainstream of the market, and the key to the development of value-oriented supermarkets lies in their ability to develop products that fit evolving lifestyle needs, Chen said.

As traditional distribution systems gradually evolve, supply chain ecosystems will shift toward more win-win cooperation, he added.

COMMENT

Editorials

Huff and puff about democracy shows US is laboring its point

His Chinese counterpart is calling for cooperation and regional stability in the Asia-Pacific region during his trips to New Zealand and Australia this week. The top US diplomat, on the other hand, has been peddling bloc confrontation in the "Indo-Pacific" during his back-to-back visits to the Republic of Korea and the Philippines on Monday and Tuesday.

While Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his hosts are focused on economic and trade cooperation, Blinken and his hosts in Seoul and Manila were concentrated on how to undermine China's development. In his speech on fighting disinformation at the 3rd "Summit for Democracy" in Seoul on Monday, Blinken revealed the extent to which the United States is suffering from anosognosia. In lambasting what he called China's attempts to "spread propaganda and twist the global information environment," he laid bare the US' inability to perceive or be aware of its own illness.

Saying that "authoritarian regimes" deploy technology to undermine democracy and human rights, he was pointing an accusing finger at other countries rather than the US. Yet the internet and artificial intelligence industries, which he identified as the two sources of disinformation, are dominated by the US, which brooks no challenges to its iron grip on them, as shown by its blatant attempt to hijack and "Americanize" TikTok on the spurious claim the Chinese-developed app is a threat to "national security" — such a threat that Joe Biden used it as a primary campaign tool en route to the White House.

Likewise, it is the US that was just recently revealed to have been spreading disinformation about China on social media via a covert CIA program. The differentiated screening practices and censorship policies of the US platforms and network giants also advance Washington's agenda, as shown in relation to hotspot issues such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Gaza crisis, and the social unrest that roiled Hong Kong in 2019.

In contrast to the US' lack of self-awareness, at least for public consumption, the collective rise of the Global South countries has fostered their awareness that they need to have the technological means to bolster their ascent. If the US was really intent on shaping a technological future, "that's inclusive, that's rights respecting, directed at driving progress in people's lives," as Blinken claimed, it should welcome the emergence of different sources of information and the diversification of the world opinion market, rather than worrying that the US' long-term monopoly of these sectors may be lost.

What Blinken said about China, along with his Philippine counterpart Enrique Manalo, in a joint news conference in Manila on Tuesday, highlighted the rose-colored glasses through which the US perceives itself, as it was an epitome of Blinken's definition of the challenge of disinformation, which he said was intended "to sow suspicion, cynicism, instability".

Hyping up China's "provocative actions" in the South China Sea, his aim was to marshal other countries in the region to join the US and the Philippines in their efforts to undermine the "democratic values" and "norms" that prevail in the region. Reassuring Manila that the US' commitment to its alliance with the Philippines "has never been stronger" only served to show that the current volatility in the South China Sea is a result of the US luring the latter to be its cat's-paw for dirty deeds in the region, especially because China and the Philippines had managed their historical maritime disputes well until the US turned Manila's head the wrong way.

To some extent, Blinken's packed itinerary from March 14 to 22 — taking him to Vienna, Seoul, Manila, Jeddah and Cairo — can be seen as being representative of the Joe Biden administration's failed but consequential diplomacy. What is happening in Ukraine, the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East unmistakably highlights what Biden means by his 2020 presidential election slogan: "Our Best Days Still Lie Ahead", as it promises further moves from the US aimed at maintaining its self-appraised supremacy, which will only create turmoil and conflict in the rest of the world.

Reinforcement of rule of law in HK

Hong Kong lawmakers unanimously passed a bill mandated by Article 23 of the Basic Law of Hong Kong on Tuesday, which will take effect on Saturday.

By fulfilling a constitutional obligation, the move marks the city taking another key step forward in plugging the loopholes in its legal system that had long been used by some to threaten national security in the city.

The bill, also known as Safeguarding National Security Ordinance, seeks to prohibit five acts that endanger national security while updating provisions within existing laws. It was the unrest that convulsed Hong Kong in 2019, which was orchestrated by external forces with the help of their local pawns, that prompted the legislative and executive bodies of the special administrative region to accelerate the drafting and review procedures of the bill. Only 50 days separated the start of the public consultation and Tuesday's passing of the bill.

While some China-bashers in the United States have tried to find fault with the short time it took for the bill to complete all the procedures, they simply ignore that US Congress passed the Patriot Act within just three days after its introduction following the terrorist attacks on Sept 11, 2001.

It is the implementation of Hong Kong's national security law since 2020 and the series of executive and electoral system reforms that followed that have paved the way for the smooth passage of the bill. By denying the external forces' proxies having a seat in the city's legislature and government departments, they have not been able to have the bill shelved. The efficiency with which the bill passed the mandatory reviews demonstrates the previous efforts to bring the SAR from chaos to order have paid off.

Some lawmakers have called the drafting of the bill, and the readings of and debates on it as a homework delayed for more than 20 years since it was first proposed, and have described the process as being of "high quality, high-score-deserved, and strictly in accordance with the legislative procedures", which featured clause-by-clause scrutiny, positive interactions and efficient deliberations between the legislative and executive branches of the SAR. The lawmakers raised many questions concerning the bill, citing almost all public concerns, which have been appropriately addressed.

Thanks to these endeavors, the bill clearly defines national security, and the criteria for the acts that can be recognized as endangering national security. Basically, the bill is expected to uphold the law, order, security and safety in Hong Kong. That not only reflects the common will of people in Hong Kong but also can provide a boost for Hong Kong's productive interaction with the rest of the world. The normal business, financial, logistics, cultural, social and people-to-people exchanges between Hong Kong and the world will only be encouraged and better protected by the bill. By providing clear legal guidelines and strong protection for people's lives, property, freedom and rights, the bill will be conducive to maintaining the city's unique advantages and status as an international financial, business and logistics center.

It is essential for lawmakers to thoroughly explain to the public in detail the legislative intent behind individual clauses, the risks to national security they aim to address and how the clauses will be applied in practice in the future so that cooperation between Hong Kong and the world can be carried out following more predictable, transparent and clear rules.

Li Min



Opinion Line

China will continue to make strides, and contribute to global economy

Many executives of multinational companies have, in recent days, expressed that the Chinese market is irreplaceable and they are optimistic about its economic development prospects. The reason for such optimism lies in China's official data on national economic performance in January and February. In the two months, the added value of industrial enterprises above designated size increased by 7 percent year-on-year. Among the 41 industrial categories, 39 achieved year-on-year growth in added value. Fixed asset investment also grew 4.2 percent year-on-year. In February, the index of enterprise production and operation activities, and service business activities is expected to have reached 54.2 percent and 58.1 percent, both in the prosperity range.

A series of data show that the long-term fundamentals of China's economy have not changed, and signs of continued recovery have emerged.

In fact, such a "good momentum" can be found in various aspects. In the first two

months of this year, China's total retail sales of consumer goods increased by 5.5 percent year-on-year, reflecting further strengthening of its consumption momentum. The country has launched a new round of large-scale equipment renewal and replacement of old consumer goods with new, which is expected to bring a market with an annual scale of more than 5 trillion yuan (\$694.50 billion).

At the same time, new consumption growth points such as domestic fashionable goods, smart home devices, entertainment and tourism have frequently emerged, bringing new momentum to expanding domestic demand and opening up new space for foreign companies.

At present, the country is making vigorous efforts to build a modern industrial system and accelerate the development of new quality productive forces. The application of new production tools such as the industrial internet has also facilitated the optimization of its manufacturing processes. It is the innovative atmos-

phere that attracts a large number of foreign companies to seek development in China. In January, 4,588 new foreign-invested enterprises were established in China, up 74.4 percent year-on-year, and inbound Western investment increased significantly, with investment from France and Sweden increasing by 25 and 11 times respectively. It is worth noting that in the first two months of this year, China's import and export of goods increased by 8.7 percent year-on-year, both seeing positive growth and helping global trade and economic recovery.

It is borne out by facts that an increasing number of factors support the recovery of China's economy. It is true, however, that many external destabilizing and uncertain factors still exist, and the foundation for China's economic recovery needs to be strengthened. However, with the accumulation of various favorable factors, coupled with the vitality of its superlarge market and rising entrepreneurship, China's economy will continue to make strides forward.

— CHINA MEDIA GROUP

'Small yard, high fence' for AI a risk aggravated

With artificial intelligence being widely used in not just science and technology but also culture, education, medicine and transportation, concerns about its misuse are only natural. AI algorithms are often used to create highly realistic images, audio clips and videos, or what are called "deepfakes". Since deepfakes first appeared in 2017, incidents of fraud or manipulation of public opinion have become increasingly frequent worldwide. The United States, for example, saw a more than 50 percent year-on-year increase in AI-related frauds in 2023 alone.

However, AI's role in generating fakes far exceeds the development speed of information authentication technology. Anyone can quickly and inexpensively generate images, audio clips, or even videos that appear so real, nobody will suspect they are fake. Industry experts are concerned

that the proliferation of deepfake content will lead the public to completely lose faith in their senses, and be suspicious about genuine information too.

Besides, military forces in many countries have long focused on the application of AI in the battlefield. The absence of an international governance framework for the military application of AI can easily lead to conflict escalation or trigger an arms race because of technological loss of control, highlighting the urgent need to arrive at a consensus.

AI has both tremendous potential and risks. Since 2016, countries have successively issued relevant policies and regulations, but progress has not kept pace with technological advancements. Both the problems of false information brought by generative AI and the risks of military AI

applications transcend borders. Therefore, the regulation and governance of AI should be addressed through international cooperation, with countries working together to prevent risks and jointly establishing a widely accepted AI governance framework.

However, it is regrettable that the US not only views China's AI development plans as hostile but also regards China as a hypothetical enemy because of which it hinders China's technological progress.

Building a "small yard, high fence" in the field of AI will only weaken humanity's collective ability to address its related risks and challenges. The US should stop obstructing the technological development of other countries, and create favorable conditions for strengthening international coordination and cooperation in the field of AI.

— GUANGMING DAILY

What They Say

Expanding common ground underpins regional stability

It is seven years since Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's last visit to New Zealand in 2017. A lot has happened in those seven years, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seriously impacted the world. Yet, what remains unchanged is the necessity for both countries to further develop their relations in various fields.

That is why Wang told his counterpart, Winston Peters, during his official visit that China is willing to hold talks on reducing barriers to investment in the service sector at an early time and build new drivers of economic growth with New Zealand in the

digital economy and through technological innovation.

Peters, who is also deputy prime minister, said that Wang's visit represented a valuable opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities that have come to the fore.

Indeed, the two countries should hold talks

on different levels to further the development of bilateral relations in trade, economic cooperation and other fields.

China is New Zealand's top trading partner. New Zealand was the first developed country to sign a bilateral free trade deal with Beijing in 2008, and their trade agreement was expanded in 2022.

That both sides realize how important it is to manage their differences and seek common ground provides a stable platform on which to raise their bilateral cooperation in an increasingly wide range of areas to new heights.

Wang is also visiting Australia, where he will meet with his Australian counterpart Penny Wong and hold a roundtable with business leaders in Canberra on Wednesday.

During his visit Wang will also meet the country's former prime minister Paul Keating, who has been a staunch advocate for friendly ties with China.

"I have strongly supported Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in his desire, in his words, to re-anchor Australian foreign policy in the region," he said. "Australia has moved substantially from the counterpro-

ductive baiting policy the Morrison government applied to China to something much more civil and productive".

What Keating said touches on the cornerstone of bilateral relations between China and Australia and also the role Australia plays in maintaining regional peace and stability.

What matters most to China-Australia ties is how their differences are managed to allow enough space for their trade and cooperation in a wide range of areas to boom.

The two countries do have differences on some issues because of their different political systems and cultures. Talking is the best way to prevent these differences damaging ties.

It is important for Australia to recognize that maintaining the healthy development of bilateral relations with China is in the interest of both countries. Australia should pursue an independent foreign policy so that it is not led astray by the United States.

China, as always, will do its best to manage differences and expand the common ground to develop ties with Australia and New Zealand.

— ZHU YUAN, CHINA DAILY

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COMMENT

Tony Kwok

Article 23 crucial for HK's long-term development

Hong Kong must remain ever vigilant so it can counter hostile forces trying to hinder the enactment of Article 23. The recent secret visit of US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns, according to reliable information, to Hong Kong was more than coincidental. There are reasons to believe it was related to the enactment of Article 23.

Simultaneously, there have been unprecedented, coordinated efforts by the Western media to demonize the proposed law, called Safeguarding National Security Bill, by spreading fake news such as Hong Kong would shut down social media platforms or land Hong Kong residents behind bars, which are untrue. The law was passed by the Hong Kong Legislative Council on Tuesday and will become effective on Saturday.

Western media spread fake news about law

The Western media's blatant interference in Hong Kong's affairs, that too using fake news, is a blatant violation of journalistic ethics and international law.

As for the trial of media magnate Lai Chee-ying, it is significant and revealing that the evidence against him primarily comes from several of his former close associates who, after pleading guilty to conspiracy offenses, testified against him in court.

One curious media aberration is that while Lai's trial received extensive coverage in local newspapers, foreign media did not bother to cover its progress, although they had been reporting favorably of Lai's many confrontations with the Hong Kong authorities over the years. They refrained from reporting about all the facts revealed during the trial because they knew their readers and viewers would easily make their own judgment, which would not be to their liking.

Unsurprisingly, some local media and the local opposition have coordinated their actions to resist the enactment of Article 23. Rumors have been circulated

on social media, saying people who violated the proposed law would be deported to the Chinese mainland despite the consultation document making it clear that all criminal proceedings related to Article 23 would be held in Hong Kong's courts.

Why do the so-called prestigious Western newspapers publish fake reports and act as rumor-mongers? The answer can be found in a recent revelation by Reuters that a special unit was created under the Central Intelligence Agency during Donald Trump's presidency "to launch a clandestine campaign on Chinese media aimed at turning public opinion in China against its government".

And in 2021, the US Congress approved an annual grant of \$300 million to be used to curb China's global influence by supporting US international media to create fake news to demonize China.

Given the open threats from hostile foreign powers and their radical cronies in Hong Kong, who are trying their best to exploit any situation to cause havoc in society at this critical juncture, it is only fitting that the Hong Kong government sped up the legislative process for Article 23. While the Western media are criticizing the government's moves to expedite the process, they have conveniently forgotten that after the Sept 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the US Congress passed the Patriot Act in just 45 days, with the entire legislative process taking only three days to complete and that too with little debate. The Western politicians and media have once again unwittingly revealed their double standard.

But the West's attempts to sabotage Article 23 is doomed to failure, because the traumatic experience of being besieged and attacked by anarchic elements with the help of hostile foreign powers has made Hong Kong residents realize the urgent need for a legislative security umbrella. And Article 23 is that legislative security umbrella — it will ensure there are no more 2019-like protests and vio-

Intensive publicity campaigns should be launched to raise public awareness and encourage them to report national security offenses.

lence which threatened even the "one country, two systems" policy.

The people of Hong Kong have become wiser after undergoing an unprecedented ordeal in 2019. No wonder in a "legal consultation survey", 98.6 percent of the over 13,000 respondents supported the enactment. They understand how the new law will plug the loopholes exploited by the rioters and demonstrators in 2019, and know it would contribute to Hong Kong's long-term stability, especially given the central government's recent announcement to extend the "one country, two systems" policy beyond 2047.

Contrary to the claims of some Western politicians and media, the enactment process for the bill was not rushed through. It has undergone public consultation, and many public opinions collected have been taken into consideration before finalizing the bill. A clause-by-clause deliberation followed with the Bills Committee of the Legislative Council holding 20 marathon sittings. Senior government officials, including the secretaries for justice and security, answered numerous questions from lawmakers and considered their suggestions on issues of public concern. The bill can be seen as striking the right balance between legal enforcement and human rights protection.

Hong Kong residents understand that Article 23 is similar to a home alarm system. The sooner it is installed, the sooner they can guard against burglary. Article 23, which would afford comprehensive legal protection against local and foreign-instigated hostile actions, is long overdue. It

has been delayed for 27 years, which made possible foreign interference in Hong Kong's affairs.

Now that the bill is passed, there is a need to be more vigilant, and refute any false and misleading remarks by some foreign and local traditional media as well as social media, and trace their origin and funding sources to hold them accountable under the law.

One effective way of doing so is to prepare a comparative chart with the national security offenses and penalties included in Hong Kong's proposed legislation on the one side and those included in similar laws in the United States, the United Kingdom and Singapore on the other. The chart would show that the law is moderate compared with those in Western, advanced countries.

National security laws of other countries far more strict

For instance, the Internal Security Act 1960 of Singapore grants executive powers to the president to authorize the detention of a person without charge for up to two years (which can be further extended) on the grounds of preventing him or her from acting in any manner prejudicial to Singapore's national security or the maintenance of public order or essential services.

So, how can the West criticize Hong Kong when the law stipulates that a person can be detained for six days on suspicion of committing a national security offense, but it would be subject to a court's approval? It must also be stressed that no innocent Hong Kong resident will be convicted because, like all criminal offenses in the common law system, all national security offenses require establishing the mens rea of a suspect — the intention to commit an illegal act intended to harm national security.

Despite the public support it enjoys, we need a contingency plan to deal with the governments of some foreign countries interference after the bill is passed. Notably the US and the UK may use this as an excuse to impose sanctions on Chinese

enterprises, individuals and other entities, which would throw China's financial market and trading into disarray and deter foreign investors from investing in the country. They have already been using scaremongering tactics to suggest Hong Kong would lose its status as a global financial center after Article 23 is implemented.

They might weaponize the US dollar, too, to weaken Hong Kong's status as a global financial and logistics hub, use dirty tricks to cause a slump in the Hong Kong stock market, and impose sanctions on individuals and entities in the SAR.

One thing is sure, the US and Western media, politicians and NGOs are likely to continue spreading rumors against Hong Kong, smearing and attacking the city to deter foreign investment and visitors. Therefore, the SAR government, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority and other monitoring bodies should be vigilant and prepare contingency plans to tackle all eventualities.

Intensive publicity campaigns should be launched to raise public awareness and encourage them to report national security offenses. And the authorities should strictly enforce it, just like what the Independent Commission Against Corruption did after the passage of the new anti-corruption law in 1974, and turning it into a strong deterrent against foreign hostile forces. This should be a game changer, helping restore lasting peace and stability in Hong Kong, making it a magnet for investors and visitors alike, and allow the SAR government to focus on economic and social development.

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David Morris

Wang's visit to Australia could mean back to business

Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Australia on Wednesday and Thursday should signal a return to a healthy economic relationship between Beijing and Canberra. Both countries have benefited from strong complementarities in trade, investment, education and tourism. But despite the free trade agreement between them, their relations deteriorated in recent years due to a series of trade disputes, and were compounded by disruptions to tourism and other bilateral activities because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Incidentally, this is the first visit by a Chinese foreign minister to Australia in seven years. As such, businesses and consumers in both countries welcome the visit in the hope that it would normalize Sino-Australian relations.

Wang is expected to meet Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong during his visit, and their talks will focus on the Seventh Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue, a high-level series of discussions to understand each other's interests and to explore new areas of cooperation. And since this year marks the 10th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries, the two sides will also discuss how to strengthen this special partnership.

There is speculation that China will withdraw the extra tariff on Australian wine and lift other trade bans including the ban on the import of live lobsters from Australia in the near future. This should remove a key obstacle to Australia supporting China's entry into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and bilateral science and technology cooperation under a new science and technology agreement.

Since the election of Albanese as Australian prime minister in 2022, steps have been taken by both sides to tamp down the fiery rhetoric that damaged the bilateral relationship. While the two countries have different perspectives on international security issues, with Australia being a traditional US ally, many believe China and Australia can prosper together while helping maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

Indeed, many Australians do not see the security issue as a binary choice preventing Canberra from strengthening its relationships with different countries in the region. According to a recent poll conducted by Guardian Australia, about 38 percent of the respondents said they believe the country's



JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

primary role in global affairs should be as "an independent middle power". Only 20 percent of the respondents said it should be as "primarily an ally of the US".

Diversity is one of the key features of Australian society, defying any simplistic

generalizations about the Australian people's views on the country's place in the world. But one thing is for sure, the Australian economy is deeply integrated with the powerhouse economies of Asia and, by default, with the Chinese economy. Its busi-

ness community will seek diversification of economic opportunities as well as mutually beneficial relations with its Chinese counterpart.

Australia will likely remain an important supplier of traditional products such as

iron ore, other minerals and agricultural commodities to China. China is an important supplier of manufactured products, and a major source of foreign students and tourists to Australia. In fact, bilateral trade increased to A\$316.9 billion (about \$208 billion) in 2022-23 according to Australia's official figures.

Australia and China also have the opportunity to collaborate in the new productive industries, as both sides switch to renewable energy, develop and implement new battery technology, and secure the supply chains for critical inputs to the digital economy. For example, Australia is a major supplier of lithium to China, and while there have been attempts to diversify the lithium supply chains by numerous countries, falling lithium prices mean new projects are unlikely to be operational in the near future. Australia remains a cost competitive and stable supplier, as long as normal bilateral relations can be sustained.

The Albanese government will be looking for dispute-free cooperation with China in the future, as it faces an election in 2025 and must compete with an opposition that continues to play the "China threat" card. Given the failure of the previous Australian government's aggressive posture to win popular support, the more moderate approach of the Albanese government appears likely to push bilateral ties in the right direction. Therefore, both sides should continue to search for common ground wherever possible, while agreeing to disagree in those areas where common ground cannot be found. Such a mature approach will serve both sides well in the future.

The Australia-China relationship is a litmus test which, in some ways, will determine China's relations with the West. For decades, Australia and China enjoyed a fruitful economic partnership, but things turned sour after the United States triggered a "strategic competition" with China in 2017 under the Donald Trump administration. Hence, China and Australia returning to a stable relationship will show the world that two very different countries can sustain mutually beneficial relations with wise leadership.

The author is a former Australian and multilateral diplomat, a non-resident senior fellow at Beijing-based Center for China and Globalization and a senior research fellow at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

GLOBAL VIEWS

BATSUKH GALSAN

Celebrating an exemplary partnership

As they mark the 75th anniversary since establishing diplomatic relations, Mongolia and China have many other historic dates to celebrate their strategic collaboration

Today, Mongolia and China enjoy a comprehensive strategic partnership. Collaboration is prospering equally in all sectors and as further commitment to this cause, both countries have agreed to strive toward setting an exemplary model of 21st century inter-state relations.

During the state visit of Mongolian President Ukhnaa Khurelsukh to China in November 2022, both heads of state issued a joint statement on advancing bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era.

The declaration arose out of the need to fine-tune the existing bilateral relations by reflecting on post-pandemic realities. The bilateral document also linked national development policy mechanisms. Against this backdrop, both parties announced their commitment to better integrate development plans, including Mongolia's Steppe Road vision with China's Belt and Road Initiative, Mongolia's New Revival Policy with China's Global Development Initiative, and Mongolia's long-term development vision until 2050 with China's two-step development strategy. This joint declaration serves as the road map for bilateral relations and for further enhancement of the neighboring partnership.

One is rather compelled to think that such political drive and zealotry serve as a signpost for bilateral relations and at the same time foster conditions favorable to strengthen the two countries' partnership in all fields of cooperation. For this reason, this period is the most favorable time in the history of Mongolia-China relations.

The high-level political exchanges between the two sides have been conducive to lifting the bilateral trade and economic relations, which are the cornerstones of their long-term strategic partnership. The volume of bilateral trade has been rapidly expanding since 2014, rising to \$10.1 billion in 2022. This is the direct results of the Outline for Midterm Development of China-Mongolia Trade and Economic Cooperation.



LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

The program has played an important role in bilateral trade, investment and development cooperation, and will serve as a principal framework for further expanding the relationship in this area in the years to come. It will focus on cooperation in mining, energy, finance, transportation, tourism and agriculture, and improve the quality and level of investment.

It should be noted that Mongolia is well positioned to greatly benefit from the BRI, which was launched a decade ago, and Mongolia has enthusiastically supported and actively participated in it since its inception. Ten years appear to be a short span in the lengthy history of Mongolia-China relations, but it is a hallmark period

leaving a distinct and lasting mark. This brings to mind China's strategy for South-South cooperation and development through the initiative's focus on facilitating trade with neighboring countries and enabling a smooth regional supply chain.

Under the framework of the FAO-China South-South Cooperation Programme, Mongolia was the first recipient of the project implemented in Asia. This program has provided critical support aimed at improving agricultural production, food safety and nutrition in the country. The numerous benefits, reaped by the participants and stakeholders, represent the building blocks of stronger agri-food systems in Mongolia.

This kind of trilateral cooperation will greatly help to further enhance Mongolia-China economic collaboration.

At the start of 2024, Mongolia has launched a new project to strengthen forest firefighting capacity toward green recovery with support from the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund. At the launch of this project, Shen Minjuan, China's ambassador to Mongolia, said that this project can support Mongolia's forest conservation efforts and promote green development. China will take a more active part in multilateral development cooperation through the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund to build a community

with a shared future for global development.

Another potential area of cooperation is the environment, in particular, combating desertification in the trans-boundary zones. The establishment of the China-Mongolia Desertification Prevention and Control Cooperation Center in 2023 is a promising start and platform for joint actions in this area.

At the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Mongolian President Khurelsukh said that by closely coordinating eco-friendly economic and social development and deepening renewable energy cooperation, the two countries can help build the Green Silk Road together and advance the harmonious existence of people and nature.

Therefore, jointly establishing ecological green zones such as forest walls, human-made oases and wildlife sanctuaries to curb the process of accelerating desertification in the trans-boundary areas can lead Mongolia and China to a new model of strategic collaboration.

People's diplomacy, cultural, educational and professional exchanges are on the path of intensification in the post-pandemic era. In this respect, the Mongolia-China Friendship Association plays a leading role in refreshing the decades-old tradition of celebrating the Mongolia-China Friendship Week in Mongolia and promoting direct cultural relationship between the cities and provinces of the two countries.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Mongolia and China and the 10th anniversary of the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries. These dates are celebrated as milestones for establishing a new model of friendship and partnership which serves the mutual interests of the two nations.

The author is former ambassador of Mongolia to China and chairman of Mongolia-China Friendship Association. 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.

ROY ANTHONY ROGERS

From infrastructure to talents

The relevance of the Silk Road educational cooperation lies in the fact that it is promoting education and development of human capital among countries involved in the BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative was launched in 2013 to increase connectivity from China to Europe by constructing infrastructure, such as highways, railways and pipelines, with partner states. After more than a decade, it is developing toward building human resources and providing opportunities for cultivating talents and skills.

The Silk Road educational cooperation is not a new concept because China has a history of being a center of knowledge and civilization.

Thus, the Silk Road educational cooperation in the 21st century is a continuation of China's legacy as a center of education, science and innovation.

Notably, China has already been engaging other countries of the Global South by participating in platforms, including the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum. In 2021, Beijing pledged to the China-CELAC Forum cooperation in areas such as green energy, infrastructure and education.

China has been enhancing educational opportunities for other countries of the Global South. For example, China has assisted in building elementary and high schools in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Besides, China has also contributed to upgrading facilities such as libraries in the universities and research centers. In addition, the Silk Road educational cooperation has enabled students from other Global South countries to further their studies in China.

Another interesting fact is that since the launch of the reform and opening-up over four decades ago, China has been making numerous efforts to promote education of

The Silk Road educational cooperation aligns with the concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind to deliver win-win outcomes and achieve development for countries involved in the BRI.

its people and those from the Global South countries. Back in 1977, less than 300,000 students were admitted to universities in China, but 40 years later, about 8 million students were enrolled in universities in various courses including engineering, business, agriculture, computer science and medicine. Among these efforts is the Silk Road educational cooperation which has benefited thousands of students within and outside China.

The function of the Silk Road educational cooperation is divided into two. The first is to provide opportunities for students from Belt and Road countries to further their education. This makes it easier for those who qualify but are unable to continue their studies due to financial factors. The Silk Road educational cooperation can provide scholarship assistance in the form of grants or loans.

Second, the Silk Road educational cooperation also creates a network of higher education institutions such as universities, colleges and think tanks with scholars and experts from various fields. The purpose is to share their expertise with people from



WANG XIAOYING / CHINA DAILY

Belt and Road countries. In addition, the Silk Road educational cooperation can provide research grants in such identified areas as green technology, engineering and agriculture. It enables exchange program activities for faculty members, experts and students.

Implementation of the Silk Road educational cooperation can improve people-to-people communication among Belt and Road countries, including China. The BRI has improved connectivity in terms of transport and infrastructure, and, more importantly, it should also improve social relationships. The Silk Road educational cooperation will enable the BRI to contribute to building human capital in the Belt and Road countries. Financial resources to sponsor Silk Road educational projects do

not necessarily come from the Chinese government or the Belt and Road countries; they can also come from large companies such as PetroChina, Tencent and China Construction Bank.

At the same time, it will empower ordinary people, especially the youth, the new generation of leaders. With the experience in Malaysia during the 1980s when the Look East Policy was launched, many young men from Malaysia were given an opportunity to continue their studies in Japan. Now, some of them serve and hold high positions in the government and private sectors. Similarly, the Silk Road educational cooperation can prove to be a channel for people from Belt and Road countries to understand China in a positive way.

The Silk Road educational cooperation aligns with the concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind to deliver win-win outcomes and achieve development for countries involved in the BRI. If carried out perfectly, it will become an effective, brilliant partnership between China and the Belt and Road countries in the 21st century.

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Z WEEKLY

All about Gen Z

Z WEEKLY

Crafting emotionally charged adventures

Scripted murder games evolve into immersive experiences, blending emotion and character depth, shaping compelling narratives for players, **Li Xinran** reports.

Social Media Digest

Polar linguistic evolution

Living in Antarctica during winter isn't just about enduring harsh conditions — it's also a unique experience that may transform the way you speak.

Jonathan Harrington, a professor of phonetics and speech processing at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich in Germany, asked a group of 26 international researchers and support staff to read a list of 29 words before departing for Antarctica and four more times during their six-month stay.

By listening to the recordings, Harrington discovered that some vowels in the words had shifted after the individuals had been isolated in Antarctica for months. For example, they would pronounce the "ou" sound in words such as "flow" and "sew" at the front of the mouth.

They also invented their own slang — words like "dingle day" for good weather, "fod plod" for rubbish collection, "gonk" for sleep, and "big eye" for insomnia.

"Six months isn't very long, so we saw very, very small changes," Harrington told the BBC. "For accents to develop to the point where they are noticeable, it really takes a generational change."



Scientists in Antarctica have been found to develop their own accent and vocabulary after spending too much time on the continent. TUCHONG

Embracing lighter living

Among China's younger generation, a burgeoning trend known as *danxue*, or a philosophy of life centered on taking things lightly, is gaining momentum. For example, during the recent Spring Festival holiday, many young people chose not to exert themselves to please their inquisitive relatives. Instead, they preferred to develop and deepen their connections with like-minded people who share similar values, rather than investing time and energy into maintaining superficial relationships.

This carefree attitude extends to various aspects of life. Numerous young people are no longer obsessed with seeking approval from others. They aren't disturbed by someone cutting in line in front of them, nor are they depressed when their job applications are turned down.

However, this approach doesn't imply that young people are indifferent or lazy. Rather, it underscores the importance of maintaining order and inner peace.

"It's a coping mechanism for young people dealing with real-life pressures," explained Wang Hui, a psychological counselor, in an interview with *Hai-bao News*, a media outlet based in Shandong province. "They feel as if they're constantly being thrown into a turbulent sea. To avoid being swept away by these 'currents', they must remain as steadfast as a rock at the seabed."

CHEN XUE



Many young people in China are learning to take things lightly in order to maintain inner peace. TUCHONG

Scripted murder games, known as *jubensha* in Chinese, have been steadily gaining popularity while continuously evolving into immersive experiences, with one of the most popular genres being those that evoke intense emotions.

According to the scripted murder trading and information platform HEYTIME, games released last year raked in a staggering box office revenue of 3.3 billion yuan, with *Love Actually I* topping the list at 31.23 million yuan.

Li Yihan, 27, also known by her pen name Tang Yuan, co-authored both *Love Actually I* and *Love Actually II*.

She attributes part of the series' success to the blend of quality content and perfect timing. "In the past couple of years, the duration of scripted murder games has significantly increased, from 4-6 hours to possibly over 10 hours. I believe many people are weary of lengthy quests and dramatic emotional swings," she explained. "That's why we created *Love Actually I*, a 4-5-hour 'dessert' or 'low-alcohol cocktail', so that players can enjoy this lighthearted story even on a weekday evening after work."

Another allure of the *Love Actually* series lies in the distinctive identities of its characters and their romantic storylines. "My partner and I refuse to accept that the world is dull and serious. I still hold onto the hope of receiving my Hogwarts admission letter someday. We aimed to infuse these sentiments into our works," Li said.

In *Love Actually II*, the authors incorporated a space for intellectual discussion, a feature that resonated deeply with Shen Hang, a passionate enthusiast of scripted murder. Shen, 27, expressed her love for scripted murder, emphasizing the chance it provides to inhabit various lives, from

people of diverse backgrounds in the past to futuristic personas.

"In *Love Actually II*, I portrayed a very distinctive character with a captivating love story. Throughout the 7-hour gameplay, I underwent a journey of questioning my existence and the world around me, ultimately leading to self-acceptance. It was a meaningful and touching experience," Shen said.

Another notable author, Wu You, 26, known by her pen name Younan, wrote *The Unfading Hawthorne Forest* and its sequel, *Hong Mei Hua Xia* (Under the Blossom). A unique feature of her works is the flexibility of the Dungeon Master's gender. In most games, the DM is typically constrained to being either male or female, but Wu has crafted her stories in a way that breaks this convention, allowing the DM's gender to remain unfixed, with the aim of dismantling gender stereotypes.

"Certain sentiments or personalities are often perceived as either masculine or feminine by the general public. By introducing flexibility in the DM's gender, I hope players can focus on the characters and the storyline," Wu explained. "In my next production, all characters will be gender-neutral, encouraging players to explore love and dynamics freely."

As authors craft the scripts, the DM guides players, turning the scripts into immersive gaming experiences.

Xu Yao, 24, a full-time DM who entered the industry after graduating from college, believes that regardless of the game genre, the DM serves as the bridge between the author's vision and the players.

Before presenting a new script to customers, Xu's team usually conducts at least one test run among staff members to ensure its quality and

smooth operation.

One of their most popular scripts, *About Me Being a Killer*, underwent several adjustments to enhance the cinematic experience, including lighting, choreography, and accents for non-player characters.

Yu Tao, 37, views each scripted murder game as a stage for performance. "Like actors, an exceptional DM must possess a distinctive style or skill set," he said.

Yu achieves this by reimagining lesser-known scripts, crafting them into his unique versions. "Instead of starting from scratch, I prefer to see my role as refining a promising script into an enjoyable gaming experience."

In the script *Qian Fo Meng* (Dream of a Thousand Buddhas), which revolves around historical and cultural relic protection, Yu integrated silhouette acting behind a screen, evoking a dynamic experience akin to moving Dunhuang murals.

"I also introduce questions that reference previous plots or details, aiming to evoke guilt or other emotions. It's all about stirring emotions, whether positive or negative," Yu explained.

Xu noted that script modifications may also cater to regional preferences, acknowledging the diverse tastes found across different regions. From an author's perspective,

Wu welcomes and supports reasonable modifications. "I understand that player preferences may vary by region or even by store, and DMs need to adapt their characters accordingly," Wu acknowledged.

However, when it comes to delivering a spectacular scripted murder experience, Yu believes it primarily depends on the quality of the script, followed by the players, and finally, the DM.

Li echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of surprising twists and a cohesive, emotionally resonant narrative. "As a player myself, what draws me to scripted murder scenarios isn't the abundance of non-player characters or the refreshments provided during the game, but rather the stories themselves," Li said. "In our next production, we aim to continue providing unexpected yet logical twists while delivering a story that resonates emotionally with our audience."

"For me, participating in a scripted murder experience is like unwrapping a gift," Shen said. "The elaborate outfits, gourmet food, and DIY crafts are merely fancy wrapping paper. The heart of the experience lies within the script itself. I sincerely hope that in the future, more authors realize this and write stories that are both surprising and logical."

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Clockwise from top right: Yu Tao, 37, a scripted murder Dungeon Master. Xu Yao, 24, a scripted murder Dungeon Master. Wu You, 26, a scripted murder author. Li Yihan, 27, a scripted murder author. Shen Hang, 27, a scripted murder enthusiast. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Z WEEKLY

Rediscovering Chinese aesthetics

Hanfu experiences a revival in popularity, blending historical symbolism with contemporary fashion trends, igniting cultural appreciation and innovative designs, both in China and abroad, **Meng Wenjie** reports.

On March 6, Douyin E-commerce released the 2024 Douyin E-commerce Female Consumer Trend Data Report. It unveiled that in the past year, the order volume of horse-faced skirts — a type of *hanfu*, the traditional style of clothing worn by the Han people — among female users on Douyin, skyrocketed by 841 percent compared to the previous year.

"I've noticed that there are so many people wearing horse-faced skirts on the streets now, from young women to children; it's unbelievable," said Wang Zicheng, 23, a *hanfu* enthusiast.

He recalled that when he wore *hanfu* for the first time in 2018 at his coming-of-age ceremony, it was still a minority interest even among young people in China. Now, he is confident wearing it everywhere, even outside of China.

While studying at University College London, UK, and now at Boston University, US, Wang has taken pictures of himself wearing *hanfu* against the backdrop of iconic landmarks in various countries, such as Big Ben, the Egyptian pyramids, and the White House, illustrating a captivating blend of different cultures.

Wei Xiaobo, 33, noticed the same change. He is the owner of the Taobao store "Huaibian Xiaozhu", specializing in restored traditional *hanfu*. He founded the store in 2014 while at university and shifted to full-time entrepreneurship in 2019.

It was at that time that he noticed more general consumers were starting to rediscover the attire. "Previously, customers who came to the store to purchase *hanfu* were mainly fans of it and were familiar with the clothes and their associated terms," said Wei. "Around 2019, however, it was noticeable that many customers had only recently discovered it or had no prior knowledge of it."

Since then, sales at Wei's store have continued to climb, with another significant surge recorded in 2023. Currently, over 41 percent of his customers are between the ages of 18 and 25.

As a frontline practitioner, Wei experienced the impact of the *hanfu* trend on production lines. Previously, it was not easy to find Chinese manufacturers for *hanfu* fabrics; sourcing from neighboring countries was often necessary. "However, an increasing number of Chinese manufacturers now produce such fabrics, and even allow customization of patterns," he said.

Tradition meets modernity

With the rising popularity of *hanfu*, traditional attire and modern fashion are blending not only in clothing styles but also in cultural and conceptual dimensions.

Some *hanfu* enthusiasts believe that each design of *hanfu*'s structural form reflects historical and cultural symbolism. They advocate for strict adherence to traditional forms and craftsmanship. However, some ordinary consumers prioritize the aesthetics and comfort of the clothing itself over strict historical accuracy.

Wei is among those who firmly uphold their beliefs regarding the structure of traditional *hanfu*. When engaged in restoration work, he

meticulously references historical materials such as museum exhibitions and reports from archaeological teams. He dedicates significant effort to studying traditional clothing, aiming to provide consumers with authentic attire in its original form.

Despite his unwavering convictions about *hanfu* aesthetics, he acknowledges the emergence of different viewpoints. "It's a natural outcome of the resurgence and evolution of traditional culture in modern society," he said.

According to him, some people misunderstand *hanfu*, assuming it's all about loose-fitting and impractical for daily wear. However, attire worn during ancient agricultural activities was also well-suited for everyday life. "We can explore more traditional casual wear to meet daily clothing needs, rather than arbitrarily altering traditional ceremonial attire," said Wei.

Zhou Shuang, 37, is a lecturer at the Wuhan Institute of Design and Sciences in Wuhan, Hubei province, specializing in character styling for film and television and traditional Chinese clothing culture. According to her, traditional Chinese attire features three distinctive design elements. First, the collar crosses over, with the right side wrapping over the left. Second, the garment is loose-fitting, with wide sleeves that extend past the arms. Third, it is fastened with cords instead of buttons.

"Each design carries its own cultural significance. For instance, the loose-fitting robes and wide sleeves symbolize the harmony of nature," she said. "For those with a deep understanding of *hanfu*, their dedication to its structural integrity is admirable. It's a way of safeguarding and upholding the historical continuity of traditional clothing culture."

However, Zhou also pointed out that for those unfamiliar with traditional clothing culture, it's understandable for them to desire a blend of classical elegance with contemporary fashion.

This combination is referred to as the neo-Chinese style. "Neo-Chinese style clothing design doesn't merely layer traditional elements but seamlessly integrates modernity and tradition comprehensively and naturally," explained Zhou. "It aims to showcase traditional charm that resonates with the aesthetic preferences of contemporary individuals."

Beyond style

Sanmu (pseudonym), 33, is the founder and designer of INGKO, a women's clothing brand specializing in neo-Chinese style. Reflecting on the establishment of INGKO with his wife in 2019, Sanmu recalls that the prevalent Chinese-style clothing options in the market at the time were mostly *hanfu* or Zen-style attire favored by middle-aged and elderly customers, leaving a gap for young fashion brands with Chinese artistic flair.

"In recent years, *hanfu* has garnered increased attention and admiration from young people, laying a strong foundation for the contemporary appreciation of Chinese aesthetics among today's youth," said Sanmu.

He also noticed that

since 2022, the neo-Chinese style has surged in popularity.

"Our suppliers, fabric merchants, and accessory providers have begun experiencing shortages, and there has been a noticeable growth in factories manufacturing related products," he said.

However, Sanmu took a distinctive approach with INGKO, aiming to capture the allure of Chinese women. For example, he believes *qipao* can be both elegant and cool, open to incorporating subtle punk or metallic elements into the design. "Why can't someone wear a *qipao* to a nightclub?" he thought.

Sanmu's design inspirations stem from heroines in films from his youth, such as Guan Qiaohong from *Hidden Man*, directed by Chinese filmmaker Jiang Wen. He fondly recalled the character's inspiration — a female assassin named Shi Jianqiao (1905-1979), who spent a decade in hiding to avenge her father's death by assassinating the warlord Sun Chuanfang (1885-1935) during the 1920s.

"These heroines embody a calm, decisive, and independent image of Chinese women, diverging from the gentle stereotype often portrayed in Western perceptions," he said.

Drawing from this inspiration, Sanmu and his wife conceived a women's clothing line called "Chushan" (Taking the Field) in early 2020. One promotional image that encapsulates the essence of this series features a woman in a black *qipao*, facing the camera with a clenched fist raised in salute.

"This concept incorporates the Taoist philosophy of *chushan*, signifying the notion of venturing out to combat evil, aiming to convey the chivalrous spirit and righteousness of Chinese women," he explained. "I hope to showcase contemporary cultural trends by blending traditional Chinese aesthetics into modern fashion, celebrating our ethnic culture."

Despite the growing *hanfu* trend in China and the efforts of enthusiasts and academics to promote it, there remains a general lack of understanding among people in other countries about Chinese traditional clothing.

According to Wang, he traveled to a dozen countries, including the UK, Germany, the US, and Mexico, while wearing *hanfu*. One memorable moment occurred at Big Ben, where international tourists were intrigued by his outfit and approached him. "They guessed about the origin of my clothes, suggesting countries like Japan, South Korea, and even Brunei, but none correctly identified that it's from China," Wang said.

He believed this misconception stemmed from the fact that people in other countries have few chances to see authentic *hanfu* items. "Even in museums like the British Museum, most clothing

artifacts are from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), which is typically not categorized as *hanfu*," he said.

One potential solution might be to integrate *hanfu* into everyday wear. In fact, Zhou's students are currently exploring possibilities that preserve *hanfu*'s cultural heritage while meeting the needs of everyday dress choices. Their innovative *hanfu* designs involve minimal alterations to the structure and focus on improving fabric and craftsmanship.

Zhou disclosed that they integrate materials such as organza or chiffon, along with contemporary decorative techniques, to give a traditional, refined look to the garments while also lowering costs and improving practicality. In contrast to traditional silk, cotton, and linen, modern fabrics usually offer affordability and ease of maintenance.

"Traditional Chinese clothing culture is essential for students to refine their aesthetic sensibilities and spark fresh design concepts, enabling them to integrate this knowledge into practical design," she said.

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From top to bottom: Wang Zicheng wears Ming-style *hanfu* at the Palace of Versailles in France. INGKO's 2023 summer collection features a neo-Chinese style *qipao*. A Ming-style cross-collar garment restored by Wei Xiaobo.

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Z WEEKLY



Embracing life beyond academia

Youth are moving away from traditional academic pursuits, favoring unconventional paths over exam obsession, sparking societal reflection on the value of education. **Gui Qian** reports.

Li Zhenyu feels as though he has been trapped by the postgraduate entrance exam. Over the past six years, he has attempted to pass consecutive exams, all of which ended in failure. When the results of the latest postgraduate entrance exam were released on Feb 26, and he had failed for the sixth time, surprisingly, Li felt a sense of relief and ease, as if he had seen it coming.

For the 27-year-old, this moment marked a turning point — a farewell to a life of exam preparation, and a shift in focus toward pursuing what he truly desires.

Li studied animation and film production at the Shenyang Institute of Engineering in Northeast China's Liaoning province. This major emphasizes practical experience, hands-on skills, and artistic talent, with less emphasis on academic qualifications. As graduation approached in 2018, only two out of approximately 30 of Li's classmates chose to take the postgraduate entrance exam, and Li was one of them.

During his time at school, Li directed several short films and won awards at various youth film festivals. His teachers believed he had potential and was suited for further academic pursuits. They felt it would be detrimental if Li went straight into the workforce, as he would likely end up doing wedding photography or working in media operations.

Li himself was deeply attached to campus life. "It was a time of pure creativity. I could fully devote myself to my work without worrying about making a living, and I could receive all kinds of support from teachers and classmates to complete my film projects," Li said. "How wonderful it would be if I could continue this as a postgraduate!"

With these expectations in mind, Li decided to take the postgraduate entrance exam. For him, the English and political theory exams posed challenges, leading to his first failure. He registered again the following year. Despite his efforts, he failed again. Obsessed with the idea of becoming a postgraduate, he kept retaking the exam and preparing for it, to the extent that it eventually became a daily routine and habit.

While preparing for the exams over the past six years, Li tried different jobs to support himself. He was surprised to find that almost all of his young colleagues were also taking various exams, whether it was the postgraduate entrance exam, the civil service recruitment exam, or other certificate examinations.

"It seemed that if you didn't take some kind of exam, you would become an outlier, disconnected from society, and lacking common ground with your peers," Li said. "But in fact, I only dreamed of life after passing the exam and never really thought over what my life would be like after finishing my postgraduate studies, or if I could even enter one."

After his fifth failure, Li wrote in a social media post, "Since the start of my preparation, it seems like everything I do is contin-

gent upon my success in the exams. Consequently, with each subsequent failure, I believed that I was not qualified to accomplish anything I had previously envisioned. More than the fear of not passing the exam, I detested this aspect of myself." He even tagged this post with "life of failure" at the end.

A year later, he finally relinquished his obsession with becoming a postgraduate and resolved to look ahead. He views his "life of failure" with no disdain or irony, but rather as a source of motivation. After so many letdowns, he is no longer afraid of failing. He is courageous enough to bypass the intermediary of formal education and pursue his passion — making films.

During the past months, Li has produced several 1 to 2-minute short films and submitted them to various film festivals. He is also filming a feature-length documentary that he has long wanted to make, focusing on a group of young people who consider themselves inadequate at work. He mentioned that he was one of those people, avoiding work and getting trapped in a life dilemma. However, now he understands that it was the mindset that trapped him.

It took Li six years to realize that the postgraduate entrance exam is not the sole choice in life. In fact, more and more young people are making the same decision — they choose not to get caught up in the race for academic qualifications.

According to data released by the Minis-



“Since the start of my preparation, it seems like everything I do is contingent upon my success in the exams.”

Li Zhenyu, an alumnus of the Shenyang Institute of Engineering



“It was incredibly exhausting and difficult. I also discovered that pursuing a postgraduate degree is a very narrow path.”

Heng Min, a student at the China University of Labor Relations



“If someone were to ask me about my aspirations for the future, I'd say I aim to become more open-minded and, above all, to embrace life with a sense of freedom.”

Jiang Ziyuan, a student at Beijing University of Chemical Technology

between her ideals and reality. "It was incredibly exhausting and difficult. I also discovered that pursuing a postgraduate degree is a very narrow path. Some of my peers preparing for the exam once said, 'If I don't pass, I'll have no future.' I sensed their fear, and I didn't want to face such a predicament," she said.

Heng decided to shift her focus from exam to finding a job. To enhance her work experience, she pursued several internships and continuously sent out job applications, yet she has not received an ideal offer.

As most young students are still navigating through life, Jiang Ziyuan, 21, has already found her beacon — to live a life that one won't regret.

Majoring in international economics and trade, Jiang is now in her fourth year at Beijing University of Chemical Technology. In fact, she began contemplating her post-graduation choices soon after entering the university.

"I've experienced the pressure of the college entrance examination and the disappointment of not being elected as a student leader. I don't agree with the model that a person's future is determined by a single chance. Later, through my internships, I found that ability is more important than a degree or certificate," she said.

"I decided early on not to take the postgraduate entrance exam, but this doesn't mean that I'm better than others. I simply experienced the pain and inner turmoil earlier and started trying to prepare myself for this," she added.

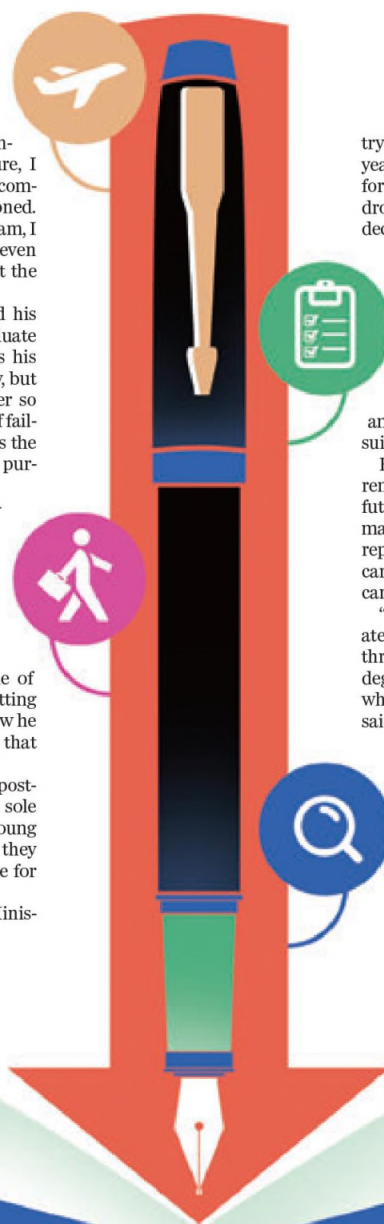
Starting from her sophomore year, Jiang interned at a bank, a consulting firm, and a top internet company. However, these glamorous industries and jobs didn't bring her any sense of achievement or happiness.

"Previously, people thought finance and the internet were the best industries. Now, many people believe that becoming a civil servant is a better choice, and many students choose to take the postgraduate entrance exam to seek some certainty in life. This makes me realize that it's more important to live life in one's own way rather than chasing after the era's trends," she said.

Jiang made up her mind to pursue academic programs in Sweden, Finland, or Denmark, and she has already applied to several universities. "The schools I've chosen aren't on the QS World University Rankings, which is unlikely good news for my job prospects in China after graduation. But should all our choices follow a predetermined path?" she said.

"If someone were to ask me about my aspirations for the future, I'd say I aim to become more open-minded and, above all, to embrace life with a sense of freedom."

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try of Education, after eight consecutive years of increase, the number of applicants for the 2024 postgraduate entrance exam dropped for the first time to 4.38 million, a decrease of 7.6 percent compared with last year. The phrase "Is pursuing higher education no longer attractive?" has also become a trending topic on Sina Weibo, amassing over 47 million views.

Heng Min, a senior student majoring in journalism at the China University of Labor Relations, is among those who have chosen to forgo pursuing a postgraduate degree.

However, like many young students, she remains uncertain and anxious about her future. The 23-year-old aspires to join a mainstream media outlet as an editor or reporter upon graduation. Regarding this career goal, she acknowledges the significance of higher academic certificates.

"There are too many journalism graduates, and academic qualifications serve as a threshold for employers. My undergraduate degree is from a second-tier university, which doesn't give me an advantage," she said.

Heng did attempt to prepare for the postgraduate entrance exam, though.

But instead of applying for a master's in journalism, she decided to cross over into English studies, which was even more challenging. In October last year, she began preparing for the exam, but after a few months, she realized the vast disparity