



Profitable move

Tibetan costume designer enjoys thriving business in Chengdu **IMAGE, PAGE 7**



Stunning Sochi

Russian resort offers plethora of active leisure opportunities **TRAVEL, PAGE 10**

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Experts stress green upgrade in steel sector

Low-carbon transformation seen as holding key to industry's future growth

By LIU YUKUN
liuyukun@chinadaily.com.cn

Further efforts are expected to actively upgrade technologies in steel smelting, optimizing production processes and promoting recycling for the low-carbon transformation of the energy-intensive steel industry to foster high-quality development, experts said.

Such moves will address challenges posed by the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and pressure from downstream industries like automobiles that are urgently demanding eco-friendly steel materials, they said.

"Additionally, efforts should be made to promote product and equipment iteration and upgrading, enhance the energy efficiency of steel production processes, and develop carbon capture, utilization and storage technologies to support carbon neutrality in the steel industry," said Mao Xinping, an academican at the Chinese Academy of Engineering and a professor at the University of Science and Technology Beijing.

The CBAM puts a price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon intensive goods entering the EU. It started trial operation in October last year, and will be implemented from 2026 onward.

The China Iron and Steel Association has estimated that implementation of the CBAM would increase the export cost of steel products by 4-6 percent. Including certificate fees, this will result in an additional expenditure of \$200-\$400 million for steel enterprises annually.

"In the context of global carbon reduction, China's steel industry faces enormous challenges and important opportunities. Achieving carbon neutrality in China's steel industry requires systematic basic

theories, a series of major technological innovations, and massive scientific and technological resources and financial investment," Mao said at a recent forum held by the China Metallurgical Industry Planning and Research Institute.

According to the World Steel Association, China, which is the world's largest steel producer, currently accounts for over half of global steel production.

CISA data showed that in 2023, China's crude steel production exceeded 1 billion metric tons, flat compared to the previous year. Steel production was 1.36 billion tons, a year-on-year increase of 5.2 percent.

Lu Shize, deputy director of the department of climate change of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, said that taking economic measures to reduce emissions has become a global consensus, with carbon pricing mechanisms as an important emission reduction measure.

Lu said that China has implemented a carbon pricing mechanism with carbon emission rights trading as a core element, actively constructing a national unified carbon market that is compatible with international standards.

"In the future, we will steadily expand the coverage of the carbon market to include more industries. For the steel industry, being included in the national carbon market faces a series of challenges such as large carbon emissions and weak data foundations," Lu said.

"Steel enterprises should focus on four key areas to tackle such challenges: familiarity with the rules of the carbon market; reducing carbon emissions through a series of measures; strengthening the management of carbon emission data; and actively participating in trading and fulfilling their obligations," he added.

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Spring charm



Above: Large areas of rapeseed flowers in Qianduo scenic area, Xinghua, Jiangsu province, draw many tourists on Thursday, this year's Qingming Festival. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations designated Xinghua Duotian Agrosystem, a rapeseed farm in the scenic area, as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System in 2014 for its unique water-land utilization method in low-lying land and its splendid raised field landscape. Apart from sweeping tombs to pay respects to ancestors, having an outing at a park or in the countryside is also a popular way to mark the day. The Qingming Festival holiday this year lasts from Thursday to Saturday.

SHI DAOZHI / FOR CHINA DAILY
Left: A Monkey King show attracts tourists at Mystic Forest Valley in Beijing on Thursday. GENG FEIFEI / CHINA DAILY

Xi sends greetings to Malta's new president

By MO JINGXI
mojingxi@chinadaily.com.cn

President Xi Jinping vowed to work with Maltese President Myriam Spiteri Debono to make new progress in bilateral relations in order to better benefit the two peoples, as he extended congratulations to the new president on her inauguration on Thursday.

Xi said in his message that China and Malta have always respected each other and treated each other on an equal basis since the establishment of diplomatic relations 52 years ago.

The two countries have supported each other on issues concerning their respective core interests and major concerns, he said, noting that bilateral cooperation in areas such as trade and investment, culture and education as well as medicine and healthcare have yielded fruitful results.

Xi said he highly values developing China's relationship with Malta, an island country in Southern Europe, and is ready to work with Spiteri Debono to carry forward the two countries' traditional friendship and deepen practical cooperation for the greater development of bilateral ties.

Spiteri Debono was sworn in as the 11th president of Malta on Thursday after the country's parliament unanimously approved her as the new president on March 27.

She is the third female president of Malta.

According to the Ministry of Commerce, two-way trade between China and Malta in the first 11 months of last year was close to \$700 million, registering a significant year-on-year increase of 75.2 percent.

Report says more single people are making wills

By ZHOU WENTING in Shanghai
zhouwenting@chinadaily.com.cn

An increasing number of single people, especially women, are turning to will services to better manage their properties and avoid them being inherited by people that they do not favor, according to a report released by the China Will Registration Center in late March.

Nearly 2,100 unmarried people had made will registrations at the center between 2017 and 2023, with the number rising significantly each year. Notably, 70 percent of them were women.

Nearly half of such will registrants have received a university education, and more than half hold managerial roles in the workplace or are

professional and technical personnel, according to the 2023 annual report of the center.

Regarding their main reason for making a will, nearly 45 percent of the unmarried people said it was to take care of their parents, and nearly 30 percent said it was to prevent the whereabouts of their property from ultimately going unaccounted for, said the report.

Data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs showed that the number of marriage registrations had shown a declining trend over the past decade, decreasing from 13.47 million in 2013 to 7.68 million in 2023. Such a decrease also seemed prevalent in many other parts of the world as well.

Chen Kai, project director of the

China Will Registration Center, said the reasons behind the high proportion of women among unmarried individuals making wills included the continuous improvement of women's social status and their increasing sense of independence.

"Such women pay more attention to the protection and inheritance of their property, and they understand how to ensure that their property is properly handled and distributed by making a will," said Chen.

"For the highly educated and those in corporate executive roles, they may have more assets and a stronger sense of both laws and risks," he said.

The report also showed that middle-aged and young people are becoming increasingly open-minded

to making wills. The average age of will registrants decreased from 77.43 in 2018 to 67.82 in 2023.

The number of people aged below 30 making will registrations grew from 61 in 2017 to 1,030 in 2023. The number of individuals aged between 30 and 39 who were will registrants grew from 73 in 2017 to 1,623 in 2023.

"The trend that will registrants are getting younger shows that the young generation is increasingly aware of protecting personal property and making plans in advance. Also, wills are no longer something of a taboo anymore, although this issue used to be usually related to death or something inauspicious in traditional Chinese culture," said Liu Guiming, honorary director of China Will Registration Center.

CHINESE GOING ONLINE FOR TOMB SWEEPING

Virtual memorials to loved ones on rise in wake of pandemic lockdowns

By LI LEI
lilei@chinadaily.com.cn

During the pandemic lockdowns, virtual memorials gained popularity due to the disruption of in-person tomb sweeping.

Even as restrictions have eased, families, friends and former colleagues continue to visit online memorials on Qingming Festival, also known as Tomb Sweeping Day, and other important occasions.

Tech companies have revamped their products to go along with this enduring popularity.

Some have transitioned away from designs best suited for desktops and laptops, focusing instead on smaller screens such as smartphones and tablets, aiming to provide round-the-clock access through portable devices.

Others have employed technologies like generative artificial intelligence chatbots and animated photos to make the age-old tradition

more interactive and laden with emotional value.

Created in 2013 first in the format of a website and then morphing into a built-in service on the messaging tool WeChat, Gurenju, or Home of the Deceased, is a shorthand of this trend.

One message on Gurenju, reads: "Deeply mourning my kind father Lu Shuming." Clicking on the message ushers visitors to a digital hall dedicated to the late stage actor from Xi'an, Shaanxi province, who died from a heart attack in 2022 at the age of 66.

Inside is a portrait of Lu depicting him with a salt-and-pepper beard, looking resolutely at the camera. A detailed obituary is attached below, highlighting the award-winning actor's career, including his performance in a play in Beijing to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 1999.

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Foreign investors upbeat on innovation

Dozens of ice resurfacers and snowmaking machines produced by TechnoAlpin were recently transported from its logistics and warehousing center in Hebei province to ice and snow venues around the world.

"This year, TechnoAlpin will continue to focus on the Chinese market, increase investment in technology, and promote the manufacturing of ice and snowmaking equipment," said Shen Yumel, marketing manager of TechnoAlpin China. TechnoAlpin is a leading supplier of snowmaking equipment headquartered in Italy.

With greater consumption and improvement of the industry, winter sports are no longer limited to the winter season only.

"The demand for ice and snow equipment from customers is developing toward greater efficiency, environmental protection and intelligence, which prompts us to increase our research and development efforts and extend our product lines," Shen added.

Accelerating the development of new quality productive forces, promoting high-quality development, and shaping new drivers of economic development, China not only provides new opportunities for the optimization of its domestic industrial layout, but also provides new opportunities for the development of foreign-funded enterprises in China, strengthening their confidence in investment and development.

Data released by the Ministry of

Commerce shows that there were 7,160 newly established foreign-invested enterprises in the first two months of this year, a year-on-year increase of 34.9 percent. The actual use of foreign investment in high-tech manufacturing reached 28.27 billion yuan (\$4 billion), a year-on-year increase of 10.1 percent.

A new joint venture set up by Mercedes-Benz Group China and BMW Brilliance Automotive has been registered recently in Beijing's Chaoyang district recently. By the end of 2026, the new JV is expected to have set up at least 1,000 supercharging stations equipped with cutting-edge technologies across China, with some 7,000 high-power charging piles.

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CHINA

Gold prices surging to record highs

Stronger US dollar may hinder increase in value of the precious metal in short term

By LIU YUKUN
liuyukun@chinadaily.com.cn

Gold prices have surged to record highs on Thursday backed by expectations of interest rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve and increasing demand for the precious metal as a safe-haven asset amid geopolitical risks. Experts said further fresh highs are possible in the long run, yet there are challenges in the short term due to the growing possibility of a stronger US dollar.

Global spot gold prices soared to new heights on Thursday, peaking at around \$2,303 per ounce. Benchmark prices at US futures and options market COMEX peaked at \$2,324.80 per ounce, also a historical high.

Joni Teves, precious metals strategist at investment bank UBS, said that one of the significant supports for the continuous surge in gold prices is enhanced market anticipation of interest rate cuts and the weakening of the US dollar.

Gold prices typically move inversely to US bond yields. As rates decline, returns on traditional investments like bonds weaken, prompting investors to seek alternative assets such as gold, thus driving up its price. Lower interest rates tend to weaken the US dollar, making gold more affordable for international buyers, boosting demand.

"This, coupled with the increased demand for safe-haven assets amid global geopolitical tensions such as the Ukraine crisis, has further propelled the rise in gold prices. Moreover, over the past few years, central banks worldwide have continued to increase their gold reserves, providing additional support for gold prices," said Yang Hong, a senior researcher at Ping An Futures.

According to the World Gold Council, central bank demand, a key driver of gold demand in recent years, saw two successive years of over 1,000 metric tons of buying. Annual net demand hit 1,037 tons last year, just short of the record 1,082 tons set in 2022.

Cao Liulong, chief strategist at Founder Securities, said that during a Fed rate hike cycle, gold prices generally decline, but in the current hiking cycle, gold prices continued to soar, indicating a failure of the traditional gold analysis framework.

Cao said accelerated deglobalization is leading to an expanded US dollar credit crack, which is a catalyst for the recent surge in gold prices. There is a possibility that the world may potentially usher in an era without a single reserve currency, offering gold the prospect of a decade-long bull run.

Huang Lichen, an analyst at WolfFinance Technology, a Hong Kong-based financial service provider, said that investors still hold high expectations for US Fed rate cuts, suggesting the possibility of gold prices continuing to surge. However, several recent economic indicators from the US have shown improved performance, supporting a rise in the US dollar and thereby putting pressure on gold prices.

Economy: Innovation drive attracts foreign firms

From page 1

"In 2024, we will introduce over 15 all-new and new-generation products covering various drive modes and product matrices. With a robust product lineup and unparalleled customer experiences, we aim to consistently fulfill the desire of Chinese customers for the Mercedes-Benz brand," said Oliver Britz, executive vice-president of sales at Beijing Mercedes-Benz Sales Services.

Zhuang Rui, executive dean of the Institute of International Economy at the University of International Business and Economics, said that China's efforts to transform and upgrade traditional industries, and promote their development towards high-end, intelligent and green directions, will further expand China's market space, stimulate new economic growth points and provide new market opportunities for the development of foreign-funded enterprises in China.

At present, Beijing is accelerating science and technology innovation and the development of the digital economy, which provides broad space for deepening economic and trade cooperation between China and other countries.

CJ Group Chairman Sohn Kyungshik said that he is willing to expand cooperation with Chinese enterprises, relevant institutions and others in high-tech fields such as artificial intelligence and big data, to seize opportunities in China's development.

According to relevant personnel from the National Development and Reform Commission, foreign-funded enterprises investing in the green economy, the digital economy and health industry projects can enjoy services including a special task team, green channels and accelerated implementation of projects.

Park Soong Chan, head of the Northeast Asia Economic Association of Korea, said that developing new quality productive forces means achieving new breakthroughs in technological innovation, production efficiency, quality improvement, and many other aspects.

China has introduced many favorable policies, focusing on stabilizing market expectations and strengthening market confidence, which have released positive signals for the medium and long-term development of the Chinese economy, and created promising development prospects for foreign-funded enterprises in the country, Park added.

XINHUA

Transition: Hebei boosts tech upgrade

From page 1

Wen Gang, director of iron and steel at the raw material and industry department of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, emphasized four key areas for the solid promotion of an upgrade and green transition of China's steel industry — focusing on promoting stable growth, accelerating equipment updates and technological upgrades, advancing digital transformation, and promoting green and low-carbon development.

Hebei province in northern China is one of the country's steel producing hubs. In recent years, the province's steel industry has continuously strengthened its industrial transformation and continuously explored new paths toward green, digital and high-quality development.

Song Xiangdang, deputy head of the Hebei provincial bureau of industry and information technology, said that the province has reduced excess capacity, continuously optimized its industrial layout, and made significant progress in energy conservation and emission reduction.

Song said that Hebei's steel industry has the largest number of Grade A environmental performance enterprises — a rating system of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment — and national-level green factories. The province has also enhanced technological innovation, and strengthened digital transformation, Song added.

Giant panda returns from South Korea

By YAN DONGJIE
yandongjie@chinadaily.com.cn

Giant panda Fu Bao arrived at Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport in Sichuan province on Wednesday, returning from South Korea.

Accompanied by veterinarians and caregivers from the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda and Everland Park of South Korea, Fu Bao headed to the isolation and quarantine area.

Born in July 2020, the female cub was the first giant panda born in South Korea and a successful example of overseas breeding through online guidance for natural conception by experts at the giant panda center. Since the 1990s, China has collaborated on giant panda conservation with 26 institutions in 20 countries. There are currently 49 giant pandas abroad.

According to the agreement on giant panda protection and research cooperation, overseas-born giant panda cubs are to return to China between the ages of 2 and 4. Fu Bao's return was scheduled for this year. According to Everland Park, over 1,000 visitors came daily to bid farewell to her before the scheduled departure.

Wei Rongping, deputy director of the giant panda center, said that when giant pandas return to China, they have to adapt to a new environment, caregivers and food.

In preparation for Fu Bao's return, the giant panda center has set up a quarantine facility at the Wolong Shenshuping Base. During the isolation and quarantine period, a team of experts will help it adapt to its new living environment.

Fu Bao's parents arrived at the park in March 2016 from the giant panda center in China, marking the beginning of collaborative research between the two countries. After giving birth to Fu Bao in 2020, they bred another pair of female twin cubs in July last year.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin stated at a news conference in January that since its birth, Fu Bao has been deeply loved by people and has played a positive role in enhancing friendship between the two nations.

According to the giant panda center, China and South Korea have cooperated in the fields of giant panda conservation and breeding, disease prevention and control, and public education over the past eight years, effectively promoting the conservation of endangered and vulnerable species in both countries.



Fu Bao arrives at Wolong Shenshuping Base in Sichuan province on Thursday.
LI CHUANYOU / FOR CHINA DAILY



Song Tao (left), head of both the Taiwan Work Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, and Ma Ying-jeou, former chairman of the Chinese Kuomintang party, attend a ceremony paying tribute to Chinese ancestor Emperor Huangdi in Huangling, Shaanxi province, on Thursday. MU JIALIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Former KMT leader pays tribute to Yellow Emperor

By JIANG CHENGLONG
jiangchenglong@chinadaily.com.cn

Ma Ying-jeou, former chairman of the Chinese Kuomintang party, called on Taiwan youths to remember the roots of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation as he led a Taiwan youth group to attend a ceremony paying tribute to Chinese ancestor Emperor Huangdi in Huangling, Shaanxi province, on Thursday, or Tomb-Sweeping Day.

Emperor Huangdi, or the Yellow Emperor, widely regarded as the progenitor of the Chinese nation, has been worshipped since the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220).

Huangling county is considered the location of Huangdi's tomb, and in recent years, a ceremony to wor-

ship Huangdi has been held there every Tomb-Sweeping Day, or Qingming Festival.

During his eight years as leader of Taiwan island, Ma held six ceremonies in Taipei to worship Huangdi. Thursday's worship ceremony marks his first time attending such an event on the Chinese mainland.

After completing the worship ceremony in Huangling, Ma delivered a speech. "Emperor Huangdi is the common ancestor of the Chinese nation," Ma said. "Today, being able to bring our young people from Taiwan to Shaanxi to personally worship at Huangling, I feel it is of significant meaning."

Most Taiwan people have a very firm belief in Chinese culture and the identity of the Chinese nation, he said.

"I have always believed that hon-

oring ancestors and remembering their origins are important foundations for the Chinese nation establishing excellent traditions lasting for thousands of years," said the former KMT leader.

More importantly, honoring ancestors and handing down fine traditions across generations are core values of Chinese culture, and part of the virtues of people in Taiwan, he stressed.

"My visit is to express Taiwan people's respect for traditional Chinese culture and ancestor veneration, and to help more people understand the importance of national cultural heritage," Ma said.

"I also hope that our young people from Taiwan, through this rare opportunity, will further remember the roots of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation, and the pride of

being descendants of Emperor Yandi and Emperor Huangdi!"

Emperor Yandi is regarded as the other progenitor of the Chinese nation.

Thursday marked the fourth day of Ma's visit to the mainland.

On Wednesday, Ma visited the Huanghuagang 72 Martyrs' Cemetery in Guangzhou, Guangdong province.

He expressed condolences that day for those affected by the strong earthquake hitting Taiwan early that morning: "I hope everyone is safe and well."



Online
See more by
scanning the
code.

Aftershocks hamper relief efforts in Taiwan

By LI MENGHAN
limenghan@chinadaily.com.cn

Aftershocks following the strong earthquake in Taiwan are complicating ongoing search and relief efforts.

Nearly 100 aftershocks, with intensities reaching magnitude 4, were recorded on Wednesday night and early Thursday morning, with their epicenters in Hualien county's coastal area and nearby waters, according to the local meteorological agency.

On Wednesday at 7:58 am, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake jolted the sea area near Hualien, killing 10 people and injuring more than 1,000. A total of 660 people were still trapped and 38 missing as of Thursday afternoon, local authorities said.

According to the island's emergency disaster management agency and media reports, the earthquake caused relatively minor damage in areas other than Hualien. Twenty shelters have been established in the county.

Early Thursday morning, a Hualien official told reporters that search and rescue efforts were almost complete, with the exception of Taroko Scenic Area, which was difficult to evacuate in time due to traffic disruptions.

Search and rescue teams arrived from all over Taiwan. Tents and daily necessities were provided to people who were temporarily staying in shelters due to damaged houses.

Meanwhile, railway services in Fujian and Jiangxi provinces have resumed operations after widespread train delays and cancellations due to the earthquake, local railway authorities said on Thursday.

China Railway Nanchang Group in Jiangxi added 97 passenger trains to meet the growing demand during the Qingming Festival holiday, which lasts from Thursday to Saturday.

The Chinese mainland has expressed concern and offered support to Taiwan.

Zhu Fenglian, spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State



Displaced residents of Hualien in Taiwan take shelter at Hualien Zhong-Hua Elementary School on Thursday. About 170 people affected by Wednesday's earthquake now live at temporary emergency shelters at the school. YANG CHENGCHEN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Council, said on Wednesday that the mainland would closely monitor the situation and any developments, and expressed the mainland's willingness to provide assistance with disaster relief efforts.

Shenzhen Airport in Guangdong province has opened a green channel for passengers and freight flights to Taiwan, and waived related fees.

The Shanghai Taiwan Investors Association has launched a fund-

raising campaign for affected people and reconstruction efforts.

Many people from the mainland have conveyed their heartfelt condolences to compatriots in Taiwan through social media, with some leaving online comments like "wish you are all safe and sound" and "hope life in Taiwan can return to normal soon".

Xinhua contributed to this story.

COVER

Memorials: Digital dedications to deceased

From page 1

The obituary, signed by Lu's family, said, "With over 40 years of his artistic involvement, my father has always respected life in artistic creation and adhered to drawing inspiration from life."

The hall, adorned with white-and-yellow wreaths and decorated with funeral couplets conveying condolences and good wishes, allows visitors to present virtual offerings such as lanterns, wreaths and incense, free of charge, and leave a few lines of kind words.

Since its creation, the digital venue has garnered 8,600 views, as the memorial's publicly accessible visiting record showed, with many occurring in the weeks leading up to this year's Qingming.

Lu's digital memorial and others like it flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic when on-site tomb sweeping was discouraged as part of a national effort to curb large gatherings and contain the highly contagious disease. As a result, cyberspace became a makeshift mourning space for those who died before or during the pandemic. However, even with the pandemic now behind them, the Chinese seem to have embraced cyber-based tomb sweeping, especially through mobile devices.

From desktop to phone

Gurenju is the brainchild of Wu Bingyang, a self-taught programmer from Hubei province. Wu, now CEO of Nantong Gurenju Info Tech Co, first launched the service to remember his father, who died of uremia in 2006 at age 52.

"I was deeply sorry about his death, so I came up with the idea to remember him on the internet," said the 44-year-old.

At the time, there already existed several websites dedicated to remembering the deceased, but none satisfied Wu.

What most vexed Wu was that all such websites required users to create an account using a phone number or email address, and each time he wanted to mourn his father, he had to log in with a password. Other people who wished to show their respect at old Wu's virtual memorial also had to first create an account themselves.

He believes the trouble involved goes against the purpose of letting the digital memories pass down through generations, and creates roadblocks for more distant relatives to mourn. "Passwords are easy to forget," he said.

Therefore, Wu stripped the registration process on Gurenju, and instead resorted to an application-verification-display procedure, in which families file applications with the personal data of the deceased, which after being verified by Gurenju employees, would be displayed in one of its virtual memorials.

Applicants would in return receive a code made up of a string of letters. To visit the mourning place, visitors only need to search for the code or the names of their loved ones.

Gurenju was among the first mourning websites to go mobile in



A couple takes bouquets of flowers to a cemetery in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, on March 16. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

2019, getting ahead of the competition.

"Shortly after we launched the service on WeChat, the COVID-19 outbreak started," Wu said.

The pandemic and the disruptions it induced in the real world, together with the convenience brought by Wu's mobile strategy, had brightened the prospect of Wu's virtual memorial project.

He said before the pandemic, virtual memorials were such a niche product that, despite painstaking efforts to promote their websites at brick-and-mortar funeral parlors, they only had 5,000 users by the end of 2019.

Now they have more than 650,000 users, of which 85 percent were accrued between 2020 and last year.

Wu said online memorials such as Gurenju had made tomb sweeping possible anytime, providing a boon to hundreds of millions of out-of-towners, but he doubts it will replace in-person mourning. "Virtual memorial is tantalizing when in-person tomb sweeping is hard to achieve. But whenever possible, I believe most people would choose to mourn on site."

Embracing AI

Online Remembrance, developed by a tech startup in Wuhan, Hubei province, is another virtual memorial service embedded in WeChat that has trended online.

Rolled out in 2021, it resembles many of its peers in functionality.

It allows users to create digital memorial halls for free, where they can upload photos and the personal information of loved ones. Mourners can also type in a few lines for a digital tombstone. From 1 to 50 yuan (\$0.13 to 6.94),



Volunteers distribute flowers as they promote a more modern and civilized tomb sweeping in Hefei, Anhui province, on March 26. GE CHUANHONG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Students pay respect to the deceased through a website at their school in Zigui, Hubei province, in April last year. WANG HUIFU / FOR CHINA DAILY

users can purchase digital offerings ranging from bouquets to home appliances.

However, over the past few months, the company added a paid function powered by generative AI chatbot technology, which

can chat with users in text messages simulating the tones of the deceased based on chat history and other private data uploaded to the platform, such as the user's nickname frequently used by the deceased.

While innovative, this function brings into question the legal rights of the deceased and their representation, but it so far hasn't caused much concern among the public.

"The function is wildly popular, and we have rolled out a free trial period to entice more users," said Zhang Xin, founder and CEO of startup Wuhan Zhongku Info Tech Co.

He said the service accrued about 200,000 users in just two years since its rollout at the height of the pandemic, though the annual increase had slowed last year to about 30,000 when on-site remembrance events resumed.

His team is currently working on another AI-powered function that can animate photos of the deceased.

Zhang said about 60 percent of the service's users are between age 36 and 60, and another 14 percent are aged 60 and older, with many scattered in first-tier cities like Beijing and Shanghai, who he said are likely to be people living away from ancestral homes where loved ones were laid to rest.

Less than 1 percent are based overseas including the United States and Canada, he said.

Inspired by the demographics of his user base, the CEO added, "We have been working really hard to make our product more accessible to the less-tech-savvy older users, such as using larger Chinese characters on our user interface."

Fireless tomb sweeping

The growing popularity of virtual tomb sweeping comes as authorities advocate "fireless" Qingming as part of a broader

effort to reform the country's funeral sector. Qingming has long been plagued by superstitious and sometimes risky customs such as burning joss paper and other offerings in forested areas where many cemeteries and private burial sites are located.

With an aim to "defuse risks", the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Forestry and Grassland Administration issued a circular in March requiring local authorities to seize the upcoming Tomb Sweeping Day to promote "civilized" and "low-carbon" options to remember loved ones.

Suggested alternatives include presenting bouquets, planting trees and organizing group remembrance events whose fire risks are easier to manage. Cemeteries and other funeral service providers are encouraged to roll out cyber-based tomb sweeping services and step up publicity against "vulgar and superstitious" funeral supplies or practices.

The ministries also suggested fostering a culture that prizes better care for parents while alive over lavish funerals or memorial events, guiding the public to remember loved ones through reading classics such as nostalgic poetry, which authorities said helps mourners improve spiritual richness.

Local governments have also been warned against price-gouging plugging the festival, when funeral supplies and relevant services are in high demand.

Reservations are now required at many sites of mourning, to manage crowds, and prevent fire risks and potential stampedes.

Artist's creative products bring loved ones closer to the departed

By LI LEI
lilei@chinadaily.com.cn

A hairdresser-turned-artist from Jiangxi province has offered comfort to hundreds of people who've lost loved ones over the past year, by making necklaces and decorations using items such as locks of hair and even ashes.

"The souvenirs allow us to reminisce about our loved ones anytime, anywhere," said Guo Chaojun, who six years ago quit his hairdressing job and started a business with friends hand-making mementos, first for newborns and then for those wanting to remember loved ones that have passed away.

"People don't have to wait for the winter solstice or Qingming Festival to visit graves. Of course, we can follow these traditions, but sometimes, we may not have the time or energy to do so," he said.

In the beginning, Guo's signa-

ture products included calligraphy brushes made of baby hair and bracelets decorated with beads made from breast milk, which he sold through channels on social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Douyin and Kuaishou.

Guo said the newborn-themed souvenir game was a cutthroat business where "competition turns the water blood red".

The idea to make souvenirs for loved ones of the deceased didn't come to the 45-year-old until 2022, when a colleague's grandfather — to whom he was also close — died. Guo remembered the man as a good cook, who would treat him and his friends with tasty dishes during their visits on holidays. Guo even planned a trip with the old man to Sanqing Mountain, a local scenic area, which they never made because of pandemic restrictions.

"My colleague and I were both very sad," he said.

To remember his friend and to

comfort his colleague, Guo carved the grandfather's portrait on a leaf from an apple tree, which he placed on a blackwood pedestal and adorned with mini-rockeries and plants.

The whole process was shot in footage that Guo posted on his short-video channels, and received hundreds of comments. Some viewers sent Guo messages asking if he could make souvenirs for their deceased family members based on their requests.

After a few trial orders, Guo's team of six quickly stopped making newborn-themed souvenirs and focused solely on products remembering the dead.

"There were so many orders for our new product that we simply had no time to take more orders for newborn-themed souvenirs," he said.

Unlike the "blood red" market of newborn souvenirs, Guo said making souvenirs for the loved ones of

the deceased was a "blue ocean", which is vast, deep and powerful — in terms of opportunity and profitable growth. Doing a job that involves death is somewhat a taboo in Chinese traditional culture. That partly explains why well-paid positions such as undertakers and morticians still struggle to find recruits.

Self-identified as an atheist, Guo said he never thought his new business would bring him bad luck.

However, he admitted stopping the original service was partly out of concern that customers might dislike that he sells souvenirs for newborns and the dead at the same time.

Over the past year, he's been confronted with requests as varied as making an impression of a still-born baby's footprint, and a button from a deceased father's worn-out jacket. He delivered some with customers perfectly fulfilled, and declined others that he doubted he could accomplish.

Guo recalled a girl who sent him strands of her dead mother's hair. Being told the mother loved sunflowers, Guo sketched Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers on a plastic wafer, which he decorated with the hair and sealed with resin. "The girl said she wanted to take the souvenir to a concert of Li Jian, her mother's favorite singer," he said.

He compared his works to the technologies that can animate portraits of the deceased, both of which can provide immense emotional value.

"Be it ashes or peach blossoms, they all eventually become a material, composed of certain elements. For me, they are just that," Guo said.

"However, for the loved ones of the deceased, the mementos hold significant, extraordinary and precious meanings. As I often say, these, like our departed loved ones, take on another form and accompany us."



Guo Chaojun makes a creative souvenir to memorialize the deceased at his workshop in Jiangxi province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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NEW YORK HEADQUARTERS

1500 Broadway, Suite 2800, New York, NY 10036

Telephone: 212-537-8888

Fax: 212-537-8898

editor@chinadailyusa.com
readers@chinadailyusa.com

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WASHINGTON

National Press Bldg, Suite 1108
529 14th Street NW
Washington, DC 20045
Tel: 202-662-7249
Fax: 202-662-7247

SAN FRANCISCO

235 Montgomery Street, Suite 900
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415-348-8288
Fax: 415-348-8388

SEATTLE

800 Fifth Ave, Suite 4100
Seattle, WA 98104
Tel: 206-922-2868

HOUSTON

1001 South Dairy Ashford Suite 100
Houston, TX 77077
Tel: 713-595-7660

CANADA | TORONTO

471 Yonge Street, 10th Floor
Toronto, Ontario, M2N 6K8
Tel: 416-481-5706

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Gaza aid efforts suffer setbacks

UN reevaluates risks; ship carrying food supplies sails back after foreign workers killed

GAZA STRIP — United Nations humanitarian aid movements in Gaza for at least 48 hours following Israel's killing of staff from World Central Kitchen, or WCK, as more questions arise over Israel's explanation of the attack on their convoy.

"We have suspended our nighttime movements within the Gaza Strip for at least 48 hours to allow for further evaluation of the security issues that impacted our personnel on the ground," said Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, on Wednesday.

The 48-hour suspension started on Tuesday following Monday's killing of WCK aid staff, he said.

He said the World Health Organization is still waiting for permission from the Israeli authorities to get access to Al Shifa hospital in northern Gaza. The WHO team is also planning to visit two other hospitals in northern Gaza, Sahaba and Ahli hospitals. However, no permission has been given to go to those sites.

In another setback to aid efforts in Gaza, a sea convoy of undelivered food returned to Cyprus on Wednesday after WCK aid workers' deaths.

A cargo ship carrying 240 metric tons of food that had been destined for the people of the besieged Palestinian enclave sailed back to Larnaca in Cyprus following the deadly attack, dropping anchor just outside the port.

A second ship, the *Open Arms* owned by a Spanish nonprofit working with WCK, arrived earlier.

The bodies of six foreign aid workers killed began the journey back to their home countries on



People carry the body of one of the slain foreign workers from the World Central Kitchen in Rafah on Wednesday before transporting them to their families outside Gaza. MOHAMMED SALEH / REUTERS

Wednesday, as more questions swirled over Israel's explanation that a "misidentification" led to the attack on the convoy.

Criticism renewed

The deadly strikes on the convoy renewed criticism of Israel's conduct in the nearly 6-month-old conflict with Hamas and highlighted the risks that the military's bombardment poses to aid workers.

Israel's military chief Herzi Halevi announced the results of a preliminary investigation.

"It was a mistake that followed a misidentification — at night during a war in very complex conditions. It shouldn't have happened," he said, giving no further details.

Meanwhile, Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas' Political Bureau, affirmed

on Wednesday the movement's commitment to its demands for a cease-fire in Gaza.

Haniyeh said in a speech that the demands include the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the Gaza Strip, the return of the displaced to their homes, entry of aid, lifting of the blockade, reconstruction, and a dignified prisoner exchange deal.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian delegation to the UN is pushing for a vote to be recognized as a full member state next month, Ambassador Riyad Mansour said on Wednesday.

"We are seeking admission. That is our natural and legal right," Mansour said, adding that he was pushing for an April 18 vote at the Security Council.

However, the United States earlier on Wednesday voiced its opposition

to full Palestinian membership. US President Joe Biden has faced protests over the conflict in Gaza all over the country.

In a different move, Spain is set to recognize Palestine as a state. Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez unveiled his intention to recognize Palestine during an official visit to Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Sanchez, who has been strongly critical of Israel's offensive in Gaza, said Spain could recognize Palestine as soon as July. But he added that his country would also be "attentive to the decisions that will be taken (by the UN) in Brussels and New York."

Earle Gale in London contributed to this story.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Thieves steal \$30m in cash in Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES — Thieves got away with \$30 million in cash from a money-storage facility in Los Angeles by breaking into the building on Easter Sunday and cracking the safe. Now detectives are seeking to unravel the brazen cash heist, reportedly one of the largest on record in Los Angeles.

Police Commander Elaine Morales told the Los Angeles Times, which broke the news of the crime, that the thieves were able to breach the building, as well as the safe where the money was stored. The operators of the business did not discover the massive theft until they opened the vault.

Media reports identified the facility as a location of Garda-World, a global cash management and security company, in Sylmar. The Canada-based company, which also operates fleets of armored cars, did not immediately respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press.

LAPD Officer David Cuellar, a department spokesperson, confirmed that officers received a call for service at 4:30 am Sunday at a business on the street where Garda-World's Sylmar location is.

Several TV news crews were filming outside the facility Thursday morning in an industrial part of the San Fernando Valley neighborhood, which is about 20 miles north of downtown Los Angeles.

Aerial footage from KABC-TV showed a large cutout on the side of the building that appeared to be boarded up by a piece of plywood.

The LAPD and FBI on Thursday would say only that they were jointly investigating the theft "to determine the person or group responsible." The agencies sought tips from the public, but they did not confirm how much was stolen or give other details such as the name of the company.

The Times reported that the break-in was among the largest cash burglaries in city history and surpassed that of any armored-car heist in Los Angeles.

Nearly two years ago, as much as \$100 million in jewels and other valuables were stolen from a Brink's big rig at a Southern California truck stop. The thieves haven't been caught.

Jim McGuffey, an armored car expert and security consultant, called the Sylmar theft "a shock." Any such facility should have two alarm systems and a seismic motion detector right on the safe, he said, as well as additional motion sensors throughout the building.

"For that kind of money, you don't just walk in and walk out with it," he told AP. "A facility should be protected from the top to the bottom and the sides."

AP

Close inspection



A farmer checks on his corn in the suburb of the Zimbabwean capital Harare on Wednesday. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared a state of disaster on Wednesday due to an El Nino-induced drought threatening food security in the country. SHAUN JUSA / XINHUA

Russian, French defense chiefs discuss Ukraine

MOSCOW/PARIS — Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and his French counterpart Sebastien Lecornu discussed Ukraine peace negotiations and the recent terrorist attack in Moscow in a rare phone conversation on Wednesday.

Shoigu told Lecornu that if Paris follows up on its statements about the possibility of sending a French military contingent to Ukraine, "it will create problems for France itself," according to a statement from the Russian Defense Ministry with no further elaboration.

The talk followed French President Emmanuel Macron's comments in February, in which he said the possibility of Western troops being sent to Ukraine could not be ruled out.

The call marked the first such contact between Russian and French defense ministers since October 2022.

The two defense chiefs talked about the readiness for dialogue on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Shoigu noted Moscow's "readiness for dialogue on Ukraine," emphasizing that a planned round of peace talks in Geneva would be "senseless" without Russia's involvement. He added that possible future negotiations could be

based on a draft document, which was discussed during Russia-Ukraine talks in Istanbul in March 2022.

However, a French government source said Paris did not show any readiness for dialogue on Ukraine during the call.

The government source said the focus of the call, initiated by France, had been to discuss the heightened terrorism threat.

"The comments by the Russian side were bizarre and threatening," Macron told reporters on Thursday.

During the phone call, Lecornu also tried to convince Shoigu that Ukraine and Western countries were not involved in the terrorist attack in Moscow.

Lecornu expressed his condolences to Shoigu for the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue in late March, which left a total of 144 people dead.

The phone call came before NATO foreign ministers met on Thursday to celebrate the 75th anniversary of their alliance, having agreed to start planning for a greater role in coordinating military aid to Ukraine.

In comments on NATO's anniversary, Russian Deputy Foreign Minis-

ter Alexander Grushko said in an interview published on Thursday that the ties between Russia and NATO are worsening, but Moscow has no intention of entering into a conflict with a NATO country.

Grushko told Russian state news agency RIA that relations were "predictably and deliberately" deteriorating, and all channels of dialogue between Moscow and the alliance had been brought to a "critical zero" level by Washington and Brussels.

"Is the military bloc ready for an open conflict with Russia? You need to ask the NATO members themselves," Grushko said.

On the battlefield, Russian airstrikes overnight in Ukraine's second-largest city Kharkiv killed four people and injured 11, officials said on Thursday.

Three rescue workers died during a second strike on a residential building in a "densely populated district of Kharkiv," Igor Terekhov, mayor of the eastern city, wrote on Telegram.

Kharkiv Governor Oleg Syngubov said Russian forces had launched "at least 15 drones."

AGENCIES—XINHUA

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN BIDDING / PREQUALIFICATION OF K-ELECTRIC LIMITED (KE) RENEWABLE PROJECTS

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Project	Document to be submitted	Submission Deadline
120 MW solar project at Deh Halkani, Karachi, Sindh	Prequalification Application	29 th April 2024
150 MW solar project at Deh Metha Ghar, Karachi, Sindh		
50 MW solar project at Winder, Balochistan	Bid	20 th May 2024
100 MW solar project at Bela, Balochistan	Bid	
220 MW site-neutral hybrid project at Dhabeji, Sindh	Bid	31 st May 2024

The parties can access the project specific "Request for Qualification" and "Request for Proposal" documents (as applicable) through the below provided website link or QR code.

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PEOPLE

A musical French connection

In the China-France Year of Culture and Tourism, pianist-turned-conductor Xu Zhong travels down memory lane to his years as a student at the Paris Conservatory



Conductor Xu Zhong (fifth from right), opera director Stefano Poda (left of Xu) and the actors take the curtain call after the performance of the opera *Romeo and Juliette* at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Beijing, on the evening of Jan 25. The opera, created by the French composer Charles Gounod, was staged in the capital from Jan 25 to 28, marking the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and France and celebrating the China-France Year of Culture and Tourism. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

By ZHANG YUNBI
zhangyunbi@chinadaily.com.cn

As this year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of China-France diplomatic relations, Xu Zhong, a leading Chinese conductor and president of Shanghai Opera House, cannot help but relive the time he spent and the moments he shared with his teachers, including master pianist Dominique Merlet, in France.

Xu, a pianist-turned-conductor, was born in 1968 and traveled to Paris at the age of 16 to take advanced piano lessons at the famous Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris. Thus began his engagement with France for 18 years, highlighted by his meeting with Merlet. "During his tenure as a professor at the college ... he was never late for the teaching sessions with me. He was always on time even when there was a general strike in the city."

Merlet, born in Bordeaux, in 1938, is a regular member of the juries of the most prestigious international piano competitions, including the Chopin Competition in Warsaw.

The French currency was still the franc when Xu joined the Paris Conservatory — the euro made its debut much later. "It took two and a half francs to buy a cup of coffee. He (Merlet) always took the precise number of coins out of one of his coat pockets to pay for the coffee."

Xu said his initial music foundation was laid at the affiliated elementary and middle schools of Shanghai Conservatory of Music,

one of China's leading music colleges.

The six years of systematic, rigorous training at the Paris Conservatory, especially with mentors such as Merlet, built what he calls "an absolute cornerstone" for his career as an orchestra conductor.

"One was fortunate to talk with a composer when the class was focused on his works," he said.

Xu, a high-profile conductor, has won many accolades including the posting as principal director of the Fondazione Arena di Verona in Italy and the first international chair of opera representing Asia at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

In 2022, he received the prestigious Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters from the French Ministry of Culture and Communication.

Last year, Xu held the baton for France's teaching symphony orchestra, Orchestre de Paris. As a mark of gratitude, he extended an invitation to Merlet to attend his concerts. But at that moment Merlet had lost almost all his hearing. "He stopped coming to my concerts. It was so painful for me."

Xu quoted his mentor as saying, "I would be squandering the ticket you gave me if I listened to the concert with my hearing aid on while having trouble enjoying the wonderful sounds."

Another fact that disturbs Xu is that while a much younger leading pianist can now get hundreds of thousands of dollars for one single show, Merlet's earning cap is just tens of thousands of euros.



Xu Zhong during an orchestral rehearsal. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"Merlet often reminds me of another great soul, my first Chinese piano teacher, Professor Wang Yu at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music," Xu said.

Wang, a dedicated and strict piano teacher and mentor who passed away in 2010, did not take any money for teaching Xu for more than a decade; the only present he took from Xu's parents was a bowl of chicken soup.

"Can we have greater teachers than them (Merlet and Wang)?" Xu said.

Language means confidence

France means unlimited inspiration to Xu, who is also a deputy to

“We have seen exponential progress in artificial intelligence-generated contents, such as the video generation engine Sora ... Yet the ultimate wisdom of humanity still comes from constant self-refinement.”

Xu Zhong, a leading Chinese conductor and president of Shanghai Opera House

the National People's Congress, China's top legislature.

He speaks of a French pianist who once visited small communities in rural areas to perform classical works, prompting Xu to ask the government to build more small- and medium-sized public art spaces so ordinary people, too, could enjoy concerts.

France, he said, has helped nurture a range of outstanding Chinese artists including composer Chen Qigang, who wrote the music for the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympic Games.

France is also where Xu reunited with Chinese culture during his student days in Paris. He watched

the classic *Farewell My Concubine* at a cinema in Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

"We should promote high-quality presentation of traditional Chinese culture," he said.

The year 2024 is also the China-France Year of Culture and Tourism.

As the first of the Beijing-based events marking the celebrations, Xu conducted the opera *Romeo and Juliette*, a work of French composer Charles Gounod, at the National Center for Performing Arts in January.

And on March 31, Xu conducted *Romeo and Juliette* again — this time a symphonic dramatic for French composer Hector Louis Berlioz. It was the first show of the China-France music special session at this year's Shanghai Spring International Music Festival.

"What a coincidence! It's my Year of *Romeo and Juliette*!" Xu said and burst out laughing.

"The one by Berlioz is also magnificent ... It well embodies romanticism and showcases French culture."

Looking back on his journey from a pianist to a conductor and then to a specialized opera conductor, Xu said it "has been quite a long, demanding journey". He added: "For an opera conductor, you must be linguistically competent enough to convince the audience in France. Similarly, if you conduct Italian works, you should speak Italian well, which is true for German works, too."

His mastery of foreign languages such as French, German and Italian

has "played a leading role" in building his confidence in Chinese culture. "You can be one of the best messengers and presenters of your own culture in Paris if you are proficient in the French language and vocalize French proverbs fluently and naturally."

Xu said he still prefers spending time reading music scores and texts in Chinese and French and taking notes at a time when many people have become addicted to smartphones, scrolling up and down their screens to watch short videos.

Urging people to return to theaters and opera houses to enjoy a masterpiece in its entirety instead of listening to short, less-than-a-minute climax of a song on their smartphones, he said: "We have seen exponential progress in artificial intelligence-generated contents, such as the video generation engine Sora ... Yet the ultimate wisdom of humanity still comes from constant self-refinement."

Xu still travels across China as well as abroad for performances and meetings. He has been witnessing the blossoming of orchestras in China in contrast to the mergers and closing down of theaters in Europe and shrinking public spending on the performing arts.

Xu suggested China's judicial system host more arbitration over international business disputes related to show business.

"It was ludicrous when a foreign partner breached the contract of a show planned in China and we were asked to sue them in their home country," he said.

China runs in this education-loving family from Pakistan

By ZHANG YUNBI

"From the 1970s, six members of our family have come to China to study, and all of us have studied at the Beijing Institute of Technology," said Ammar Muhammad, director of operations at the China-Pakistan International Industrial Academic



Integration Alliance of the Tang International Education Group. The young Pakistani national spoke in Mandarin while sharing his family's bond with China during a recent interview with China Daily. "Our family gatherings are like BIT alumni reunions ... we are literally 'native' to BIT," he said.

The family's interactions and bond with China would not have been possible without the China Pictorial magazine. "At that time, the Pakistani people, too, had a preference for Western countries, and many Pakistani people went to the United States and Europe to

study. Yet my grandfather was intrigued by China Pictorial, which was distributed by the Chinese embassy in Pakistan every month ... and he took them home."

"My father saw a lot of photographs of Chinese architecture in China Pictorial and was impressed by the Chinese people who were working very hard to build their motherland." Muhammad said that China Pictorial also had contents on traditional Chinese culture, such as Chinese opera and martial arts.

"There were also a couple of movies that impressed my father, like *The White Haired Girl* and *The Cock Crows at Midnight*." Produced in 1951 and 1964 respectively, both movies portray how Chinese peasants, old and young, rose to fight against the brutal exploitation by feudal landlords.

Muhammad said that Pakistani society, too, was dominated by a select few who owned land and land resources, and exploited the ordinary people at that time. "My father thought that the Pakistani people also needed to build their

own country, so he wanted to visit China and explore the country ... he was full of curiosity and developed an inexplicable affinity toward China."

Explaining how his father got a chance to study in China, Muhammad said that he read a piece of news that a cultural exchange program between China and Pakistan will enable some Pakistani students to travel to China for higher studies.

"With the support of my grandfather, he availed the opportunity to do so."

After coming to China, Muhammad's father saw for himself the unity of the Chinese people and their dedication to build their country.

"Cadres, intellectuals and students used to visit local communities to learn how to better serve society," he said. Their source of knowledge was not confined to the classroom, the chalk and the blackboard, and books. His father "learned in China that theories should be linked to the reality of the world", Muhammad said.

"This convinced my father even

further that 'the future of the world belongs to China.' He used to tell us stories about his stay in China, and our house was full of objects from China. Growing up with these things, it was natural that we too wanted to study in China."

Beginning in 2005, Muhammad and his two sisters came to China to complete their higher studies. He said the Belt and Road Initiative has opened a door to a new world for an increasing number of young Pakistani people.

"The fundamental goal of the initiative is to explore new ways of common development with neighbors and partner countries, and to open a road to happiness and the benefit of all countries," he said.

Muhammad is now in charge of cultural exchange programs between the two countries in his institution, which has incorporated the advanced teaching standards of Chinese vocational education in the Pakistani education system, benefiting at least 10,000 Pakistani youths every year.

"In 2019, we invited 19 students from Pakistan to come to China to

study automobile testing and maintenance. The piloting and experience of this group of students helped us develop a very good perspective and adopt the right approach," he said.

Talking about the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, Muhammad said that he has visited the place for work. And he loves Xinjiang not just because it is China's province-level region closest to his motherland, but also because of its beautiful landscapes, rich agricultural produce and modern infrastructure.

Xinjiang's modernization, he said, is based on tapping the region's distinct features and its innovation-oriented ethnic culture. "Xinjiang makes high-quality products with distinct features, offers unique tourism programs, integrates different cultures, and maintains ethnic harmony to make life better for all," he said.

He said he hoped that his motherland would learn from the experiences of Xinjiang and the rest of the Chinese nation how to become a prosperous and strong country.

"The open, safe and civilized social environment of Xinjiang provides the world with a good Chinese solution to the problem of multi-ethnic and multi-religious integration and common modernization. The region is worth visiting for people from all countries."

Looking back at the past 18 years, Muhammad said China is his "second home" and only because of China has the unique story of his family been made possible. "My family's story is a reminder of how the fate of an ordinary family from a Belt and Road partner country has changed in tandem with China's development. China has always been such a lovely, trustworthy and honorable presence in my heart and in the hearts and minds of the rest of the Pakistani people."

Muhammad appealed to more international students to come to China for higher studies and training. "China is a very inclusive and enterprising country. Whether you are an engineer, an actor or an artist, you will be able to find your career path in your area of expertise," he added.

READ



Sunflowers, pumpkins and peppers grown from seeds bred in space. Shaanxi province is transforming its traditional farming techniques with this agricultural project. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Amazing seeds from space

Researchers make important strides toward ensuring food supplies on Earth by crossbreeding mutated plants

By QIN FENG in Xi'an and ZHOU HUIYING

Guo Rui and his agricultural research team have made the breeding of seeds in space a new starting point for the transformation of traditional farming and brought a modern circular economy to Shaanxi province.

Space breeding is a process in which plant seeds are exposed to cosmic radiation and microgravity during a space mission, causing genetic mutations. Then the seeds are returned to Earth, where scientists evaluate the mutations, some of which confer properties favored by farmers, such as greater yields, shorter growth periods and better resistance to disease.

So far, Guo's team has successfully sent Shaanxi varieties of buckwheat, sesame, kiwi, Sichuan pepper, orchids and millet into space. The experimental process of optimizing and improving them is ongoing. So far, they say they have filled the domestic technological gap and enabled space agriculture to move from Shaanxi to the world.

"China is the world leader in the space breeding industry, and Shaanxi is at the forefront nationwide," said Guo, director of the Shaanxi Engineering Research Center for Plant Space Breeding. "Grain is the foundation of a country, and seeds are the priority of agriculture, as they play an irreplaceable role in increasing crop yields and improving crop quality. All these are closely related to the vital interests of farmers."

Integrating field breeding with experimental cultivation, industrial promotion and popular science education, the center focuses on developing new technologies, cultivates

professional talent and promotes the growth of space agriculture.

So far, the center has crossbred a batch of high-yield and high-quality plant varieties using seeds that were modified in space. It has obtained independent intellectual property rights for these in China, obtaining 11 agriculture-related patents and providing strong technical support for the rapid application of China's space-induced breeding achievements on the ground.

The modified crops have shown improved quality, strong resistance to disease and a longer stable period, with a general increase in yields of around 20 percent.

In August 1987, China's ninth retrievable scientific-experiment satellite carried a batch of seeds on its first space journey. Upon returning to the ground, scientists found significant genetic changes and initiated a series of further experiments involving crossbreeding.

"Space is a super laboratory that simultaneously possesses extreme conditions such as microgravity, weak magnetic fields, strong radiation, a vacuum, extreme cleanliness and ultra low temperatures," Guo said. "The harsh environment stimulates the seeds."

So far, Chinese scientists have cumulatively created more than 40,000 space-induced germplasm materials and developed more than 460 new varieties of rice, wheat, corn, soybeans, cotton, oil crops and vegetables, significantly improving crop yields and quality and generating economic benefits of over 360 billion yuan (\$49.8 billion), Guo said.

While breeding a variety of flowers and vegetables, the team also focuses on promoting locally advantageous varieties to support agricul-



Top Above: Professor Guo Rui, director of the Shaanxi Engineering Research Center for Plant Space Breeding, introduces seeds from space to visitors. Above: Red rice seeds bred in space. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

tural and rural development.

Mizhi county in Yulin is well known as a center for millet in Chi-

na. However, for a long time, the cultivation of Mizhi millet had to rely on introduced seeds because of a

lack of independent varieties.

In 2018, Guo's team started the Mizhi millet space breeding project, and in May 2020 they sent some of the millet seeds into orbit aboard a Long March 5B rocket.

They got the seeds back after three days in space and have completed five generations of crossbreeding on Earth, which will help fill the gap in local independent brands.

Last year, the county planted modified seeds on 20 hectares to demonstrate integrated planting of regular millet with ground-bred seed varieties using the space mutations, according to Ren Shugang, head of the county's agriculture and rural comprehensive technology promotion station.

"The base can also issue a call for the integrated, high-quality fields and varieties, good methods, machinery and technologies for the millet growers, guiding more farmers to participate," he said.

In recent years, Guo's research team gradually shifted their focus to the breeding of ecological grass and forage grass in high-altitude and arid regions.

"For a long time, 75 percent of our country's forage grass and all the grass for ecological preservation relied on imports," he said. "The production gap of forage grass and ecological grass is restricting the development of China's animal husbandry and the restoration of the environment."

In 2019, the team began research and development on high-quality forage grass varieties in temperate regions.

"Now we have achieved phased research results, which can provide various technological support for large-scale promotion and applica-

tion," Guo said. "We hope to cultivate high-quality forage grass with space-modified seeds that will not only improve the ecological environment but also provide increased income for farmers."

In Guo's view, telling an accurate, vivid and interesting story of this high-tech field is just as important as the scientific research itself.

To attract more attention from the public to the space-modification industry, Guo has written a series of popular science books to popularize the technology.

"Space breeding is not mysterious. Actually, the achievements of space breeding can be seen everywhere in our daily lives," he said. "Flowers, tomatoes, peppers, pumpkins and more plants using genetic modifications from space can be found in many markets."

Space-breeding science not only ensures our food security but can also change the future lives of humanity and the Earth, he said. "Therefore, it is necessary for everyone to know about these emerging technologies."

In addition to research and development in the seed industry, the team has been actively participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, seeking cooperation in the agricultural industry and academia to promote the development of strong seeds, smart technology and the development of healthy animal husbandry.

"We will adhere to innovation-driven development, continuously strengthen international exchanges and cooperation and make greater contributions to the development and strengthening of the aerospace agriculture industry," he said.

Contact the writers at zhouhuiying@chinadaily.com.cn

Gene tech boosts ability of crops to grow in poor soil

By HU DONGMEI in Yinchuan and ZHAO RUINAN

Developing plants that efficiently utilize sunlight to produce the highest yields — especially in poor soil and on the least amount of land — has long been the research goal of Xie Qi of the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Genetics and Developmental Biology.

Over the past 20 years, he and his research team have been researching plants that are tolerant of salt-alkali soils, looking for "varieties that can grow on barren land where ordinary crops struggle to survive". Success will mean that poor land, previously thought to be useless, or at best difficult, can be more widely used to grow crops.

The saline-alkalization of soil has been a significant problem in China for a long time. Farming on saline and

alkaline soils is widely recognized as a major challenge because the poor soil has an adverse effect on plant growth and crop yields. China has about 100 million hectares of saline-alkali land, of which around 33 million hectares are available for farming.

What is the critical element in making a crop tolerant of salt-alkali soil conditions? Xie and his team of researchers found answers in sorghum.

Sorghum, the fifth most-grown food crop in the world, originates in the Sahelian Belt in Africa, where harsh environments make the crop more resistant than others to many abiotic stresses caused by salinity, drought and extreme temperatures.

It has been recognized as a valuable cereal plant resource for exploring genetic adaptability to stress. However, sorghum has more than 37,000 genes, making it like "finding

a needle in a haystack" to select genes that confer salt-alkali tolerance.

Since 2015, Xie and his team have collaborated with several institutions, including China Agricultural University and Ningxia University, to conduct whole-genome sequencing on more than 350 sorghum germplasm samples collected from around the world. These sequences were repeatedly compared with relevant information in public gene databases, leading to a breakthrough discovery.

"We found that some sorghum species are exceptionally salt-alkali tolerant, likely due to certain gene mutations. So we compared the genes of these species with others of poor tolerance and finally identified a related gene," Xie told Cover News.

The research, which was published in the journals *Science* and *National Science Review* in March

2023, found that the gene AT1 negatively affected the alkaline tolerance in sorghum and rice.

This meant that knocking out the gene could enhance a crop's alkaline tolerance.

Field experiments showed that without the gene, crops such as sorghum, rice, wheat, corn and millet had higher yields and biomass by approximately 20 percent on salt-alkaline lands in Ningxia Hui autonomous region and Jilin province.

In addition, the study further detailed the mechanism of the AT1 gene in plant alkaline stress response.

Experts have said the finding is of great significance for China's — and even the world's — food security.

Huang Xun, deputy director of the Institute of Genetics and Developmental Biology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, called food a

top priority in China's overall national security, and safeguarding arable land is critical.

"If we can create crop varieties suited for these fields, then we can use this waste land to produce food and feed the nation," he said.

Currently, there are 618 million hectares of sodic land — soils with high alkalinity — around the world.

The study estimated that using just 20 percent of alkaline land to plant crops without AT1 would generate at least 250 million tons of additional food annually.

In February, the National Natural Science Foundation of China named the genetic discovery one of China's top 10 scientific advancements for 2023. International reviewers for the journal *Science* also considered the work to be a breakthrough in agricultural production. Ningxia University recently

announced new progress in this research: The university's research team used a molecular design to test the AT1 gene's effect on salt-alkali tolerance in a number of crops. The work is expected to play a significant role in managing such land.

"After genetic editing, we found that previous findings can be applied to crops like rice, wheat and corn. This indicates that the findings have broad application prospects," said Xu Xing, a professor at Ningxia University and one of the scientists credited with the discovery.

"We hope to apply the results of this research to various crops in Ningxia as soon as possible. This will be of great significance in improving their salt-alkali tolerance," Xu said.

Contact the writers at zhaorunan@chinadaily.com.cn

IMAGE



Nyima Wangden (left) and his daughter sell traditional Tibetan costumes via live streaming at their clothing store in Chengdu, Sichuan province, on Jan 5, 2024.

PHOTOS BY XINHUA/SHEN BOHAN

Tibetan businessman Nyima Wangden's life in Chengdu

Nyima Wangden, a Tibetan businessman hailing from Heishui county of Aba Tibetan and Qiang autonomous prefecture in Sichuan, has lived in Chengdu, the provincial capital, for over two decades. Nyima Wangden and his wife Hoing Je, both of whom had inherited the crafts of designing and making traditional Tibetan costumes from their elders, have been operating a specialty clothing store in Jinniu district of Chengdu since 2016.

In recent years, thanks to its pleasant climate, open cultural environment and vibrant economy, Chengdu has gradually become a leading migrant destination for people of minority ethnic groups from elsewhere in Sichuan and its neighboring provinces and regions.

As they work and live in the city, people of ethnic minorities also bring along the culture and traditions of their hometown. An increasing number of Tibetan people settled in Chengdu leads to a swelling market for traditional Tibetan costumes. Consequently, Nyima Wangden's business is thriving, earning him over 200,000 yuan (about \$27,800) a year.

Nyima Wangden is also an active volunteer in community governance, often devoting his time to mediating neighborhood issues and helping late comers better fit into the community. For him, Heishui and Chengdu are both his hometowns.

XINHUA/SHEN BOHAN



Clockwise from upper left: Nyima Wangden poses for a group photo with his two children and wife at his clothing store in Chengdu, Sichuan province, on Jan 5. Members of the Chengdu Jinxing artistic group rehearse a Tibetan dance in Jinjiang district of Chengdu, on Jan 20. Nyima Wangden selects cloth for traditional Tibetan costumes at a market on Jan 5. Nyima Wangden designs traditional Tibetan costumes according to a customer's request at his clothing store on Jan 4.



From left to right: Nyima Wangden discusses the details of Tibetan costumes with workers, on Jan 4. Nyima Wangden chats with a Tibetan resident on Northwest Street, on Jan 4. Nyima Wangden (Right) and his wife Hoing Je (Left) help their son put on traditional Tibetan costumes in preparation for live streaming at their clothing store in Chengdu, Sichuan province, on Jan 5.

TREND



From left: Electric bicycle riders don thick clothing on their way to work in Shanghai in November. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Commuters wear coats in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, as winter arrives. CHEN YIHANG / FOR CHINA DAILY White-collar workers relax after lunch at the Bund Finance Center in Shanghai in October. WANG GANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Workplace dressing-down

New attitudes to their career and high-pressure lifestyles are changing workers' style codes

By ZHAO YIMENG

zhaoyimeng@chinadaily.com.cn

Cartoon-patterned cotton pants with a knitted dress layered over them, red-checked trousers paired with black leather shoes, or pajama pants matched with rain boots. These outfits are not part of a weird outfit competition but what some young people are wearing to work.

In recent months, "gross outfit at work" has been trending on social media, with photos and short videos of young people wearing ugly clothes at the office garnering millions of views.

The source of "gross outfits" can be traced to a blogger on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, who shared her work experience in early September 2023 and mentioned how she had to endure working without heating during winter.

She ended up wearing flesh-colored fleece pants and fleece sneakers under her red work uniform, and was scolded by her female boss for "disgusting" dressing.

In the related comments, some people said they now go to work without even bothering to wash their faces. After getting up, they simply wipe their eyes with a towel, brush their teeth and head out.

Others mentioned that they are too lazy to carry a backpack, so they use milk tea packaging or takeaway bags to carry items they need for work.

Some claimed that after having a job, their "worn-out clothes finally found a place to show up" and joked that there is no one to care about at the workplace.

Though some commented that young workers in China "are rectifying the workplace", more believe that "gross outfits" don't mean untidiness or resistance to work, but advocacy of their relaxed attitudes, which focus on their feelings instead of traditional rules.

Du Jinghua, a 22-year-old employee in Beijing, said although the lackluster outfits in short videos tend to be a novel expression of young people, the reasons behind it should get public attention.

As a worker in the e-commerce industry, Du usually wears simple and comfortable clothes at work and cares less about the style of his outfit.

"Gross outfit reveals a change in young people's attitudes toward the workplace, transforming from personal feelings compromised by work to vice versa," Du said.

A casual outfit may look indecent but is comfortable, reflecting the practical attitude that young employees prefer at work, Du said.

Although many people post ugly clothes at work just to follow the fashion or be different, he believes that "gross outfits" are one of the measures young workers use to challenge the current workplace environment.

"As the new generation's mentality toward work and life gradually changes, resistance to traditional rules at the office will be a trend, expressed either in an ugly outfit or in other ways in the future," Du said.

Yuan Xinyue said she or her colleagues never wear such outfits to work but the phenomenon may reveal a rebellion to proper work attire and a response to workplace and social pressures.

Apart from pursuing self-expression, the disheveled outfit of many young workers may just indicate the undeniable facts of long commutes,



As the new generation's mentality toward work and life gradually changes, resistance to traditional rules at the office will be a trend, expressed either in an ugly outfit or in other ways in the future."

Du Jinghua, 22-year-old e-commerce worker in Beijing

limited sleeping time and anxiety due to work pressure, Yuan said.

"Given the time-consuming and crowded commuting environment, we tend to choose fast and convenient clothes to save preparation time in the morning. The practical function of clothes usually gives way

to fashion," the 23-year-old Beijing resident said.

On the other hand, office culture and interactions with colleagues can also affect the dressing choices of young people.

"Some may feel trapped by 'beauty shame' at the workplace, fearing that dressing too elegantly might draw undue attention from co-workers and bosses, which leads to gossip and ridicule," Yuan said.

This could trigger self-doubt of "my abilities don't match the attire" and feeling nervous and embarrassed, she said.

Additionally, some young workers may face economic pressures, burdened by a mortgage or car payments, making it difficult to afford proper attire, she added.

"The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly influenced people's consumption habits. Some people are no longer pursuing outward refinement and extravagance, but focusing more on practicality in terms of dressing," Yuan said.

However, Yuan thought the trend of "ugly outfits" was not likely to

become mainstream in the future. "Most people do not blindly follow fads. Instead, they tend to choose and adjust their fashion style according to the specific occasion and their individual needs," she said.

For instance, formal attire is often required for professions such as lawyers and broadcasters, while journalists may prioritize simplicity and convenience in their dressing to assist their work.

"Dressing appropriately allows us to demonstrate our professional demeanor," Yuan said.

Cao Qingqing, a 25-year-old college counselor in Shanghai, said "gross outfit" videos on Douyin "are a little bit exaggerated". But many people do believe they can dress as casually as they can at work, reflecting a changing mentality.

"When I just started my career, I carefully dressed up and wore beautiful makeup every day in a bid to attract the attention of my colleagues, particularly my boss, trying to remind them of the newcomer," Cao said.

"But later my workmates in the

office told me that whatever they looked like, the boss would not care and their career hadn't improved because of their dress. They gradually gave up focusing on outfits and were unwilling to spend time dressing up for work as the commuting and overtime were already exhausting," Cao said.

Cao prefers casual and comfortable clothes at work, but she and her workmates never wear slippers or sloppy clothes like those in the videos.

If her career went into a steady period and included a few social activities, Cao said she may just randomly dress up and wear exquisite makeup to make herself happy.

People post videos of "gross outfits" to vent pressure but few really dress like that at the workplace, she said.

"I think there's a common struggle that not many people actually love the idea of going to work, especially among the younger generation," Cao said.

So, they just dress comfortably every day because they don't really

care about gaining more job opportunities or competing in the company through this approach.

Although more people prefer wearing comfortable and clean clothes in the office, a workplace outfit usually depends on the exact profession, Cao said. She used to work in the film and television industry, where it's necessary to have flawless makeup and follow certain dress codes.

Hao Lin, a 31-year-old employee at a finance company in Beijing, has to wear formal shirts at the workplace. He usually prepares multiple shirts in his locker room at the office and gets changed before and after work. "I prefer wearing loose T-shirts and hoodies on my way to work, making the long and tiring commute easier," Hao said.

Female workers have more choices but a collar is a must for either dress or coat, he said.

"We can never try 'gross outfits' at work to defy the company's regulation, though we do dress more relaxed on casual Fridays," Hao said.

Hao usually participates in sports activities held by the company after work and needs to bring sportswear with him every day. Sometimes he has three outfits for a single day.

"I heard some female friends at other companies can wear leggings and sports tops inside a coat at work and directly go to the gym after work without getting changed," he said, adding that a free dressing environment would better help the work-life balance of young workers.

For English teacher Li Min, it's impossible to stand at the lectern and face primary school students with a "gross outfit".

"The eye-catching dress would distract student's attention and affect their learning, so we usually wear normal clothes," Li said.

The 27-year-old sometimes wears hoodies and sweatpants, pairing with sneakers, or casual vests with jeans to perform daily running exercises with students.

Once when she switched from wearing glasses to contacts to avoid fogging on the glasses in the freezing winter, her students stared at her curiously and kept asking where her glasses were.

"A little change of my appearance or hairstyle will distract their attention at school," Li said.

Though most of Li's colleagues wear sporty clothes to work, one of them at the elementary school in Hefei, Anhui province, always dresses like a fashionable office woman.

"This Chinese teacher who's my age wears shorts and long boots in winter and short skirts in summer, often standing in high heels," she said.

She added that her colleague doesn't dress up for others or feel shameful about her outstanding attire. "She just wants her time at work to be happier," Li said.

For many young employees, working abilities matter more than appearance. A refined outfit may represent one's demeanor, yet dressing casually for work can also be a choice for professionals seeking relaxation and self-expression.

Dress codes and habits vary across different job positions. However, as long as the worker maintains a professional attitude and doesn't compromise work efficiency, whether it's dressing up or dressing down it is entirely up to the individual's discretion.

Yan Zhongqian and Luo Jiayuan contributed to this story.

BIZ LIFE

AI transforms sales, eases biz practices

Language barriers, logistics no longer burdens as tech takes over old roles

By FAN FEIFEI
fanfeifei@chinadaily.com.cn

Chen Meijun, a toy saleswoman at Yiwu International Trade Market in East China's Zhejiang province, recently posted a video on an online service platform in which she became a "language expert" — speaking four foreign languages fluently while introducing products.

With the help of fast-developing artificial intelligence technology, Chen simply needs to record a video in Chinese and upload it to the internet, whereupon the video will be automatically converted into 36 different languages. The shape of the speaker's mouth can also be adjusted accordingly based on the pronunciation.

Chen said platforms for traditional Chinese foreign trade enterprises to win new customers have changed in recent years, as digitalization has become a necessary option for small and medium-sized companies to ramp up sales.

Chen said she has also opened a digital showroom to exhibit new products, and buyers can directly make purchases via online marketplaces.

"Some overseas buyers even came to Yiwu and directly sought me out after seeing my videos online," she said.

Currently, Chen's products are sold to more than 100 countries and regions around the world, including the Middle East, South America and Russia. Chen is among a growing number of entrepreneurs capitalizing on internet-based cutting-edge technologies to transform traditional foreign trade models, as well as expand their presence in emerging markets.

Experts said an increasing number of innovative digital technologies — such as virtual reality, augmented reality and AI — have been applied to online e-commerce sites, with the potential to change the way people shop by providing interactive consumer experiences and creating merchandise demonstrations and descriptions.

The impact of AR and VR in retail is proving transformative, as retailers can use these emerging modalities as an extension of brand experience to engage customers in immersive environments and boost revenues, they added.

Chinese tech heavyweight Alibaba Group's research institute Damo Academy has collaborated with the company's online licensing platform Alifish to launch an extended

reality-powered marketplace on e-commerce platforms Tmall and Taobao that allows consumers to shop for commodities using customizable avatars.

Extended reality is an umbrella term for AR, VR and mixed reality technologies that merge aspects of the physical and digital worlds together to create an immersive and interactive experience.

Alibaba said consumers can browse virtual stores from over 30 internationally recognized franchises, choose their own digital avatars and place product selections in virtual shopping carts. They can also have a 360-degree view of commodities and use AR technology to virtually "try on" clothes, watches, jewelry and shoes on the platforms.

As part of its push to embrace immersive retail, Tmall has rolled out about 10,000 3D virtual "model houses" in collaboration with offline furniture retailers. The models allow online customers to place virtual furniture in their homes to see how things look without having to visit a brick-and-mortar store. Designers can customize furniture and interior decor according to customer preferences.

In addition, Alibaba's luxury shopping platform Tmall Luxury Pavilion has made available a virtual influencer named Timo. The gray-haired character is able to curate and host exhibitions on the platform, including showcases of 3D digital collectibles featuring luxury brands.

The application of AR and VR technologies in online marketplaces will not only improve buyers' remote shopping experiences and promote consumption recovery, but also spearhead a new shopping trend, said Yu Jianing, executive director of the metaverse industry committee at the Beijing-based China Mobile Communications Association.

"Innovative digital technologies are playing an increasingly vital role in empowering the real economy and promoting deeper integration of the digital world with the real world, while offering an immersive and interactive experience that makes shopping more convenient," Yu said.

Chinese e-commerce platform JD has teamed up with world-renowned luxury brands to enable customers to view product details via 3D visualization, offering virtual trying-on experiences via AR technology.

It also unveiled AR/VR makeup features to help customers test multiple cosmetic products on their faces with virtual makeup results before hitting the purchase button. Con-



Above: Yiwu launches its updated trade service platform chinagoods.com, which offers cutting-edge artificial intelligence technologies to the consumer goods market in Yiwu, Zhejiang province, in October. GONG XIANNING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Below: A foreign buyer checks out products at the Yiwu International Trade Market in February. SHI KUANBING / FOR CHINA DAILY



sumers can virtually try on products including lipstick, blush, colored contact lenses and eyebrow pencils.

JD said it hopes to give tech-savvy customers the interactive experiences they get in offline stores via VR/AR technologies, while offering them the convenience of having their favorite products just clicks away from arriving at their doorstep.

Hong Yong, an associate research fellow at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation's e-commerce research institute, said AR and VR technologies are becoming important driving forces for the high-quality development of e-commerce. They will also help unleash the potential of consumption and bolster industrial upgrades.

According to a report released by market consultancy International Data Corp, the investment scale of the global AR and VR market is expected to increase to \$74.73 billion in 2026, with a compound annual growth rate of 38.5 percent.

Specifically, the CAGR of the Chinese AR/VR market is expected to reach 43.8 percent during this period, ranking top globally.

Jennifer Ye, PwC consumer markets leader for the Chinese mainland, said as technological advances gather pace, merchants should be prepared for rapid transformation — including upgrading both online and offline shopping contact points — to stay relevant to consumers.

Companies should take advantage of creative opportunities posed by various high-potential and malleable technologies, including AR and VR, Ye said.

"Retailers should look to enrich the customer experience through the development of online communities in the metaverse, where VR avatars can come together and discuss shared interests," she added.

Moreover, AI-powered virtual hosts that bear a close resemblance to real humans in appearance and behavior have increasingly been utilized in livestreaming e-com-

merce. These virtual hosts can mimic human facial expressions and movements, and interact naturally with consumers while answering their queries promptly.

Chinese tech giant Baidu Inc has released its digital avatar platform Xiling, which provides a complete set of services for the creation and operation of virtual hosts, virtual celebrities and virtual brand spokespersons in fields including retail, broadcasting, television and finance, enabling more industries to use virtual humans.

In a test, a virtual livestreamer created by Xiling sold smart watches for 33 hours, generating 13,000 yuan (\$1,801) in sales. Virtual hosts can change makeup and clothing at the user's request to improve the shopping experience of the latter.

Li Shiyan, head of Baidu's digital human and robotics business department, said more and more brands are looking to use virtual hosts in livestreaming and other marketing campaigns, which will help enterprises reduce at least 50 percent of operational costs by cutting spending on brick-and-mortar livestreaming locations, hardware and hiring human anchors.

The development of the virtual human sector is still in its initial stages and there exist some challenges, such as how to affordably produce digital assets and digital content, and how to make digital humans interact with real people more naturally, Li said.

The size of China's virtual human market is expected to reach 270 billion yuan by 2030, according to an industry report released by Qbit-AI, an industry services platform focusing on AI and other cutting-edge technologies.

The use of AI-powered virtual

hosts in e-commerce livestreaming sessions can bring a feeling of freshness to users, while brand owners can attract new consumers via this innovative method, said Mo Daiqing, a senior analyst at the Internet Economy Institute, a domestic consultancy.

Virtual livestreamers can play an important role in finishing tedious and repetitive tasks, enhancing the shopping experience and boosting product sales, thus allowing human hosts to devote more time to creative work, Mo said.

However, they will not totally replace real human hosts, as it is difficult for virtual anchors to fully establish trust with fans, Mo added.

Technology is playing an even more central role in the sales process, and chief sales officers need to get ahead of a series of innovations that will significantly disrupt sales strategies and pricing methodologies, said Noah Elkin, vice-president and team manager at market research company Gartner's sales practice.

Elkin said businesses are already seeing the impact of AI in many of the tech solutions they use, but generative AI in particular will be a breakthrough that will help scale sales content and engagement.

"The digital human economy is going to revolutionize the composition of traditional sales teams and grow to become a market worth hundreds of billions of dollars," he said.

Gartner added that the AR/VR experience, in particular, will be integral as the metaverse ramps up, and business-to-business buying and selling becomes almost exclusively digital. In the next five years, AR/VR could become a critical sales channel for sales meetings, product demonstrations and marketing training.

Cross-border e-commerce energizing export growth

By FAN FEIFEI

Chinese online retailers are accelerating steps to expand their global footprint in a bid to cultivate new customers and diversify revenue sources, as a rising number of Chinese vendors opt to sell their products overseas via cross-border e-commerce platforms, industry experts said.

As an emerging modality for foreign trade, cross-border e-commerce has become an important driving force boosting China's exports amid downward economic pressure and external uncertainties.

Online discounter PDD Holdings, parent company of Chinese e-commerce platform Pinduoduo, said recently that its cross-border e-commerce platform Temu — which offers discounted products shipped directly from China — is now present in more than 50 countries across North America, Europe, Asia and Oceania.

Launched in the United States in September 2022, Temu has gained popularity among consumers overseas as it offers a wide selection of merchandise, including apparel,

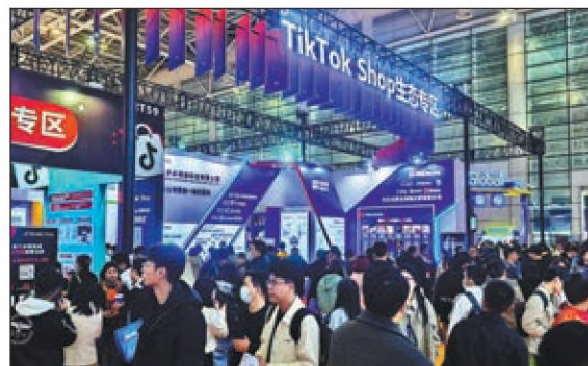
consumer electronics, jewelry, shoes, bags, cosmetics, baby products and pet supplies at competitive prices.

Chen Lei, chairman and co-CEO of PDD Holdings, said the company hopes to use the supply chain capacities it has built up in recent years to create a new channel that enables consumers from different countries and regions to buy products directly from factories, providing more flexible and personalized supply chains and more cost-effective shopping experiences.

Other Chinese cross-border online marketplaces are ratcheting up efforts to expand their global presence. Short-video app TikTok, owned by Chinese tech company ByteDance, launched its e-commerce service, TikTok Shop, in the US in September.

The service enables users to find and directly buy products featured in livestreaming broadcasts and short videos. TikTok, which began rolling out e-commerce services in 2021 in Indonesia, has entered more than 10 countries, including the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Moreover, fast-fashion online



Visitors gather at TikTok Shop's booth during a cross-border e-commerce expo in Fuzhou, Fujian province, in March. WANG DONGMING / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

retailer Shein has announced a further expansion of its product categories through collaborations with select global brands and third-party vendors to fulfill its customers' increasing demand for diversified products.

China's cross-border e-commerce sector has seen robust growth in recent years. The import and export

scale of the country's cross-border e-commerce transactions reached 2.38 trillion yuan (\$329.7 billion) last year, up 15.6 percent year-on-year, said the Ministry of Commerce.

Cui Lili, director of Shanghai University of Finance and Economics' Institute of E-commerce, said the popularity of made-in-China prod-

ucts in overseas markets shows these cost-effective goods have gained wide recognition and burnished the image of Chinese brands abroad in recent years.

Fresh growth opportunities are emerging, Cui said, adding that Chinese enterprises should make full use of cross-border e-commerce platforms to quickly meet demand from overseas markets, learn more about relevant laws, regulations and quality standards of other countries, and adjust supply chains to make products that meet local needs.

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

Cross-border e-commerce has emerged as a vital channel for small and medium-sized Chinese enterprises to expand in overseas markets, Zhang said. "Price, quality and service are the most important factors consumers consider when buying products, and cost-effective goods have shown some obvious

advantages amid global economic downward pressure."

For Temu and Shein, one of their core competitiveness factors lies in products with competitive prices and fast delivery, which are highly reliant on the establishment of supply chains, he said, adding that the platforms that provide good shopping experiences and services will gain the upper hand amid fierce competition.

Cindy Tai, vice-president of Amazon and head of Amazon Global Selling Asia, said Chinese sellers who sell products abroad through Amazon's overseas marketplaces have maintained steady growth in the past year. She said cross-border e-commerce is increasingly becoming a new growth driver for China's foreign trade.

Tai said the company will ramp up efforts to help Chinese merchants build brands, simplify global operations, optimize global supply chain services, expand their global footprint, as well as scale up localization inputs this year.

Data from Amazon showed that the number of Chinese sellers on Amazon's global sites, each with sales exceeding \$1 million, increased by more than 25 percent year-on-year from October 2022 to September 2023.

TRAVEL



Tourists take a chairlift at the Krasnaya Polyana alpine resort, in Sochi, on Oct 23. DMITRY FEOKTISTOV / TASS

By REN QI in Moscow
renqi@chinadaily.com.cn

Gateway to the famous Russian Riviera, Sochi is a renowned Black Sea resort known for its vibrant boardwalk and stunning sunsets.

During the summer months, the coastline comes alive with pulsating beats from nightclubs that last until dawn. In winter, this former Winter Olympics host city attracts ski enthusiasts from all corners of the globe.

Located along the Black Sea coast in Southern Russia, Sochi stands as the country's largest resort city, offering a familiar yet captivating experience to visitors worldwide. Hosting prestigious events such as the Winter Olympic Games, Formula 1 Russian Grand Prix, and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Sochi has established itself as a prominent destination on the global stage.

Originally named in 1896, Sochi's title may have originated from the local term "sshatche", meaning "place by the sea", reflecting its historical significance as a trading hub.

Sochi is known in Russia for its sunny skies and balmy temperatures, and former leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin had a vacation home near this Black Sea coastal city that was also known as the "All-Union health resort" of the Soviet Union.

Stalin's personal study, featuring a wax statue of himself, is currently accessible to the public. Throughout Stalin's governance, the coastline was adorned with grand neoclassic structures, such as the lavish Rodina and Ordzhonikidze sanitariums.

Today, Sochi welcomes visitors year-round, offering not only beach holidays but also a plethora of active leisure pursuits. From ski resorts to ice arenas, the city boasts a range of athletic facilities built for the Olympic Games.

The former Olympic Park now is called Sochi Park, a Western-style amusement park, and the Sochi Autodrom, a street circuit that hosted Formula 1 races.

Additionally, the Fisht Olympic Stadium has been transformed into an open-air football venue for international tournaments like the FIFA Confederations Cup and FIFA World Cup.

Sun, sea or ski, you can see it all in stunning Sochi

Black Sea resort offers a plethora of active leisure opportunities

Where to Stay?

Adler District: If you're looking to blend a beach getaway with mountain escapades and enjoy the best of both environments, Adler would be an ideal location to consider settling in. Additionally, the hotel prices in Adler are quite affordable.

City Center, Sochi: If you're looking for a city vacation that combines beach relaxation with a visit to a botanical garden, this is an excellent choice. Everything is conveniently located nearby or just a short taxi ride away.

Krasnaya Polyana: If you're

planning to ski during the winter season or participate in adventurous outdoor sports, this is the perfect destination for you.

Getting around the city is easy and straightforward once you arrive. The public transportation system consists of taxis, buses, and a popular cable car system favored by tourists. Additionally, there are several train stations available for convenient travel within the city.

REN QI



A skier in a costume takes part in the BoogelWoogel carnival at the Rosa Khutor ski resort, on April 7, 2023. DMITRY FEOKTISTOV/TASS

Pro Tips

For international tourists visiting Sochi, it is essential to have your passport, registration, and migration card with you at all times to stay in hotels.

It is advisable to carry an adequate amount of cash for convenience.

When traveling, opt for registered taxis like Yandex or Uber, or use public transportation to avoid potential scams. It is recommended not to engage in local negotiations if you are unfamiliar with the area to prevent being deceived.

Ensure to book your hotel in advance before your trip to secure accommodation.

Dressing in layers is advisable due to the varying weather in Sochi, especially in the highlands, allowing you to adjust your clothing as needed throughout the day.

If you are on a budget, it is suggested to avoid visiting Sochi from Dec 25 to Jan 10, as this period sees a surge in tourists leading to increased costs.

REN QI

offer scenic gondola rides to their highest points, allowing guests to admire the picturesque landscape from viewing platforms or indulge in top-notch dining at the mountain's summit.

Urban dining

After a day in the sun or snow, dining in Sochi offers a delightful and distinctive experience, influenced by the city's southern location and its close proximity to the sea.

Take a leisurely stroll along the Naberezhnaya to explore the charming open-air cafes and seaside restaurants.

Situated just a few kilometers from the Georgian border, Sochi is infused with tantalizing scents of grilled meat and khmeli suneli, a traditional Georgian spice mix carried by the sea breezes.

Enjoy the best shashlik (kebab) at Chyo? Kharcho! on the Naberezhnaya, or savor its signature kharcho (lamb stew) and other Georgian delicacies.

The spacious terrace offers a welcoming ambiance with views of the boardwalk and beach, perfect for unwinding with a beer while enjoying some people-watching.

For seafood enthusiasts, a visit to Dok is a must. This upscale spot overlooking the harbor features a raw bar offering oysters from the Far East, the White Sea and local Black Sea waters. Another top dining choice is the restaurant lounge at sea level in the Sanremo Hotel, providing indoor and outdoor seating, a tempting seafood menu, and a chic atmosphere.

To experience a taste of Europe in Sochi, make a stop at Frapp near the train station. Indulge in sweet or savory waffles, fresh-squeezed juice, Viennese coffee, or simply mingle with Sochi's hipsters before departing on your train journey.

For a rich cultural experience, adventurous travelers may opt for a stay at a seaside sanitarium. Alternatively, the Sanremo offers a cozy atmosphere and an excellent beachfront location.

The Sochi train station underwent renovations for the Olympics and now boasts a splendid appearance. Sochi's airport is located in Adler, 25 km to the south, with numerous flights to Moscow.



The Black Sea is seen through the window on a train from Sochi city center to the Winter Olympic Village. REN QI / CHINA DAILY



People take pictures of sakura blossoms in Sochi. ARTUR LEBEDEV / SPUTNIK

SPORTS

WATER POLO

Referee dad is Max's official inspiration

US Olympian draws motivation from father's NCAA career

Throughout his water polo career — from growing up in Long Beach to playing for UCLA and the US national team — Max Irving has drawn inspiration from his father, Michael.

Each of them knows what it's like to work in front of a hostile crowd.

Max Irving is preparing for the Paris Olympics — looking to help the US to its first medal since it won silver in 2008 — while Michael Irving is a long-time men's college basketball referee assigned to the NCAA Tournament again this year.

"Just to be able to see him and his professionalism and just how focused he is when he is officiating a game is something that's really inspiring to me," Max Irving said, "because I know if my dad's been able to do it for as long as he's been able to do it, then I can definitely at least try my best to continue that legacy in the water."

Making the most of his time in professional leagues in Italy and Greece, Irving has turned into an indispensable member of the US team. He scored 25 goals as the US clinched a spot in Paris by winning the 2023 Pan American Games in Chile. He collected 10 goals as the US finished ninth at the world championships in Qatar last month.

"If you ask me, 2017, he was first time with us ... is he going to be here where he is right now, I would give you the wrong answer, I would tell you no," US coach Dejan Udovicic said. "He's really improved."

"Without Max with this team and this roster, if Max is not playing or he is not playing on that level with what he's supposed to give us, it's not easy to replace him."

The 28-year-old Irving played in his first Olympics in 2021 in Tokyo, but there were no fans in the stands because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Irving, who has two brothers and a sister, should have plenty of support this time around.

"Being able to watch Max compete in person at the Olympics is really going to be one of the biggest thrills that we've ever had as a family," Michael Irving said.

Max Irving got into water polo as part of a family emphasis on staying active. He played baseball, football and



Members of the US men's water polo team train for this summer's Paris Olympic Games at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, California, on Jan. 17. An attacker Max Irving, pictured third from top, is the son of Michael Irving, a former Pac-12 college basketball referee. AP



Max Irving has become a key player for the US, scoring 25 goals as the team won gold at the 2023 Pan American Games. AP

soccer before he went to a summer camp at a community college that included a couple of weeks of diving and water polo.

A couple of camp counselors told Michael and his wife Kelly that they thought Max was a natural for water polo, and they suggested a local club for the sport. Max also had two cousins on his mother's side who played water polo.

"I remember going to watch some of their games," he said, "and just being completely interested in the game because I thought it really had a cool mix of basketball, soccer, a little bit of ice hockey with the exclusion and the penalty box."

Michael Irving said Max "found his calling with water polo." He became a three-time All-American at UCLA, helping the Bruins win three national championships. The attacker still ranks among the career leaders at the vaunted program with 102 assists, 105 steals and 40 field blocks.

Along the way, through his time with the US team and playing abroad, he also has become an advocate for increased diversity in water polo — a seemingly perpetual challenge for the sport. He is the only black man on the national team, but he said he sees signs of progress in the lower levels.

"You're definitely seeing a lot more diversity. Is it at a level that things are completely inviting and inclusive? We're trying to make it that way," he said.

Michael Irving, who played college basketball at Rice and got into refereeing through a friend, said he knew nothing about water polo when Max started playing. He pitched in by taping Max's games so his son could watch them later.

He also used his perspective as a referee to help Max learn to focus on his play.

"I can share with Max as well some of the pet peeves that officials may have as far as player misconduct or coach misconduct or maybe mouthing off too much," he said. "Just letting him know, control what you can control. You're going to waste your efforts and your energy if you're worried about the officials."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA



Max is the only black member of the US water polo team and is a prominent advocate for diversity in the sport. AP

GOLF

All-conquering Scheffler showing instincts of a Tiger

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Florida — Scottie Scheffler is next in line for comparisons with Tiger Woods because golf, like other sports, is always looking for the heir to the throne.

Scheffler is playing great golf, measured as much by his elite ball-striking and alarming consistency as the results. He now has nine victories against the strongest fields — one of them a small field in the Bahamas — in the 25 months since he won his first PGA Tour title.

Equally impressive is his 65 percent rate of finishing in the top 10.

The next Woods?

"I think that's a funny question," Scheffler said after his record-tying final round made him the first back-to-back winner of The Players Championship last month.

He found out the answer a month earlier at Riviera during the Genesis Invitational.

"I'm not going to remember the exact numbers, but we're playing at Riv this year and I hit my tee ball, and this guy yells out, 'Congrats on being No 1, Scottie — 11 more years to go!'" he said.

And then Scheffler repeated the number to let it sink in for anyone to listen. "Eleven more years to go."

Scheffler reached No 1 in the world for the fourth time after his runner-up finish in the PGA Cham-

pionship last May, and he has been there ever since, challenged a few times by either Jon Rahm or Rory McIlroy.

And now with his second straight win — a five-shot victory at Bay Hill, a five-shot comeback at TPC Sawgrass — his lead at the top of the rankings is the largest since Dustin Johnson in May 2017. Johnson stayed No 1 for 64 consecutive weeks, the longest in the post-Woods era. Scheffler is currently at 43 weeks. His total time has been 78 weeks.

Woods holds the record at 281 consecutive weeks, breaking his previous mark of 264 consecutive weeks. His total time at No 1 was slightly more than 13 years.

Scheffler was off by two years. No need to quibble.

"Anytime you can be compared to Tiger I think is really special," Scheffler said. "But I mean, the guy stands alone I think in our game. He really does."

Scheffler has tied Woods with the most Players Championship titles — two.

"Outside of that, I've got 14 more majors and 70-some PGA Tour events to catch up," he said. "So I think I'm going to stick to my routine and just continue to plod along, try and stay as even-keeled as I can."

It's easy to overlook Johnson, part-



Scottie Scheffler hits out of a bunker en route to retaining his title at The Players Championship on March 17 in Florida. AP

ly because he is with LIV Golf and is seen against a full roster of great players only at the four majors, and partly because it has been seven years since he was at his most dominant. He won three straight tournaments — Riviera and two World Golf Championships — and was the overwhelming favorite at the Masters until slipping down the stairs the day before the first round and having to withdraw.

Before him was McIlroy, who won

seven times from May 2014 through May 2015, including consecutive majors. And then he injured his knee playing soccer, missing the British Open at St Andrews, and lost the No 1 ranking to Jordan Spieth.

Scheffler offered a small reminder about looking too far into the future. He felt something in his neck on the second hole of his second round, and the pain was such that it hurt to take the club too far back. He needed treatment after the



Anytime you can be compared to Tiger I think is really special. But I mean, the guy stands alone I think in our game. He really does."

Scottie Scheffler, on comparisons to Tiger Woods

13th, 14th and 15th holes. He had reason to withdraw except that he was playing well — he was tied when he felt the pain — and his competitiveness kept him from stopping.

So he got through Friday with a 69, and then relied more on his hands for a game he described as "kind of slapping it around." He birdied the last three holes on Saturday for a 68 to stay in the game, five shots behind.

And then he felt better on Sunday and delivered a masterpiece — a hole-out from 92 yards (84 meters) for eagle on No 4, four birdies in a five-hole stretch around the turn and a 64 to match the Players Championship

record for the lowest Sunday score by a winner.

And no one was terribly surprised, the ultimate compliment.

Statistically, he led the field from tee-to-green, just like he seems to do whenever and wherever he plays. It wasn't his best week with the irons and he fared a little better than middle of the pack in putting.

It's been that way for some time. His consistently great play first came into focus at the start of 2023 when it took until July at the British Open for his first result worse than a tie for 12th. And it hasn't really stopped.

The best since Woods in his prime? Scheffler gets closer the larger his sample size gets. The real measure is when expectations get too high for anyone but Woods to match. It's getting close. Still to be determined is whether it gets to him, which sounds unlikely.

"I try not to place too much emphasis on results, good or bad," Scheffler said.

"I show up to try and perform my best and hopefully win tournaments. But when I stand on the tee on Thursday, I'm not thinking about the trophy ceremony at the end of the week. I'm just trying to be committed to the shot and just go from there."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

SPORTS

BASKETBALL

Close encounters of the college kind

More tightly fought contests yet another positive for this season's record-breaking NCAA women's tournament

This spotlight season for women's college basketball isn't merely creating brighter stars and bigger ratings. It's also producing closer games.

The average margin of victory in NCAA Tournament women's games this year has been 15 points. That average hovered between 16.2 and 17.2 for each of the previous four seasons, giving an impression that the tournament lacked competitiveness.

"I think there's a little bit more parity than we've had in the past maybe because of the (transfer) portal," North Carolina State coach Wes Moore said on Tuesday. "But I just think it's a great time."

The average 2024 men's tournament game has been decided by 14.4 points, an increase from previous years. So the difference in victory margin between the women's tournament and the men's tournament is only six-tenths of a point per game.

That's a big change from recent years.

Women's tournament games had an average scoring margin that was anywhere from 4-5 points greater than the men in 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023; the 2020 tournament was called off because of the pandemic. The top 16 women's seeds play at home for the first two rounds while all men's games are at neutral sites.

Home sweet home?

This year, the top 16 seeds in the women's tournament all won their first-round games by double-digit margins. The NCAA has been hesitant about moving away from home-court sites for the first two rounds because of attendance concerns.

Ole Miss pulled off a stunning second-round victory last year by beating top-seeded Stanford on its home floor but this year lost its second-round game at Notre Dame.

"I'm not an advocate for home-court games," Ole Miss coach Yolett McPhee-McCuin said at the time. "We've got to figure out how to be a top-four seed, top-16, so we can have the home-court advantage, or if you're going to go in someone's place and knock them off like we did last year, you need to have all cylinders clicking."

Surprises still rare

For all the excitement the NCAA women's tournament has produced this year, it hasn't generated many surprises.

Only four lower-seeded teams won in the first two rounds: No 11 seed Middle Tennessee knocked off No 6 Louisville on a neutral site in the round of 64, while No 7 seed Duke won at No 2 seed Ohio State, No 5 seed Colorado won at No 4 seed Kansas State, and No 5 seed Baylor won at No 4 seed Virginia Tech in the round of 32.

Last year, seven lower seeds won games in the round of 64 alone, though no higher-seeded teams lost on their home floors.

Still, the average margin of victory in the round of 64 and round of 32 was 16.56, the lowest since 2015, according to Stats Perform. The games got even closer in the regional



This season's NCAA women's tournament has been a huge ratings hit in North America thanks to breakout stars and increasing levels of competitiveness. AP/GETTY IMAGES



rounds at neutral sites. Every team that reached the Final Four had at least one close call.

Iowa was tied with West Virginia with just over two minutes left in their second-round game. South Carolina was clinging to a two-point lead over Indiana in the closing minutes of a regional semifinal. UConn led Syracuse by only two points with a couple of minutes left in their second-round game. North Carolina State watched its 20-point lead over Tennessee shrink to two in the fourth quarter before pulling away for a second-round victory.

Wins by lower seeds

Lower seeds have gone 19-41 in the men's tournament and 9-51 in

the women's tournament, but the results have been more similar in the last couple of rounds.

Eleven lower seeds won in the first round of the men's tournament, with Middle Tennessee the lone first-round winner among lower seeds in the women's division.

In the round of 32, women's lower seeds went 3-13 and men's lower seeds were 2-14.

The lower-seeded men's teams went 5-3 in the Sweet 16 and 1-3 in the regional finals. In the women's tournament, the lower-seeded team went 3-5 in the Sweet 16 and 2-2 in the Elite Eight.

Narrow margins

Twenty-six of the 64 men's games

so far have either reached overtime or were decided by fewer than 10 points.

The women's tournament has featured 23 games with margins of fewer than 10 points.

The underdogs

The women's tournament doesn't have any Cinderella stories to rival North Carolina State's march to the men's Final Four as a No 11 seed. Every women's team to reach a regional final was seeded third or better in its region.

Aside from North Carolina State, the lowest-seeded men's team to advance beyond the first weekend was Clemson, which got to a regional final as a No 6 seed.

Final Four familiarity

The men's tournament features defending champion UConn but also has Alabama making its first-ever Final Four appearance, Purdue made it for the first time since 1980 and North Carolina State is here for the first time since its 1983 championship.

The women's Final Four teams are more familiar with this stage. South Carolina is in its fourth straight Final Four; Iowa is the defending runner-up and UConn is here for the 15th time in the last 16 seasons and a record 23rd time overall. The exception is North Carolina State, whose last Final Four trip was in 1998.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Japan's slam-dunk success built on perseverance and planning

The progress of Japanese basketball in recent years can be credited to perseverance, according to Akira Yamamoto, senior manager of the youth and technical development section of the Japanese Basketball Association (JBA).

At the 2023 FIBA Basketball World Cup, Japan was the only Asian team to earn a spot at the Paris Olympics, marking its first qualification for Games on foreign soil since 1976. Additionally, the Japanese women's team secured its place at Paris 2024 in February.

In a written interview with Xinhua, Yamamoto said that the experience gained from the 2019 FIBA World Cup and the Tokyo Olympics has elevated the strength of Japanese men's basketball. Meanwhile, the Japanese women benefited from their silver-medal finish at the Tokyo Games, allied to the dedication of coaches, staff and players.

He outlined several key factors

behind this breakthrough: strategic leadership from the national coach, support from national staff, the involvement of NBA players, daily development of Japanese players through an enhanced domestic league, and sufficient exposure to international competition.

The JBA is supportive of players who ply their trade abroad, deeming it helpful for them to gain more international experience, and conducts regular check-ins to monitor their progress. Japan boasts two NBA players, one in France, and several in NCAA Division 1 for men. On the women's side, players are active in the top-tier leagues of Australia and Spain.

Japan's B.League currently allows each team to sign three international players and one Asian import. It is reported that the B.League plans to further relax restrictions on the number of appearances by foreign players.

Yamamoto believes that the presence of foreign players contributes greatly to improving the quality of the game and has a positive impact on the performances of Japanese players.

The influence of the *Slam Dunk* manga series has significantly boosted interest in basketball across Japanese society. As of 2023, Japan had over 570,000 registered basketball players, distributed across various age groups.

"We usually start our Under-16 and Under-18 national team camps with approximately 30 players, and after organizing several camps, we select a final squad of 12 players," Yamamoto said.

Yamamoto stressed that the JBA has built strong links with Japan's high-school league and college basketball scene, emphasizing the crucial role of campus leagues in nurturing talent.

"For the high-school league, we

organize the Top League and the Block League with top high-school programs. Top League is for high schools that have won or have ranked highly in the national championships. For the Block League, we divide 47 prefectures into nine blocks, and these feature the schools that are not playing in the Top League," said Yamamoto.

"For college basketball, leagues are organized in nine blocks as well, and games are played from September to November. The competition format is different for each block. Also, there is a national tournament where top teams from each block participate," he added.

Besides basketball, Japan's soccer and volleyball teams have also produced impressive performances in recent years. Both the men's and women's soccer teams are top contenders in Asia, and are enjoying increasing success on the global stage. The Japanese men's volley-

ball team made history last year by reaching the top four in the FIVB World League and securing a spot at the Paris Olympics.

Asked about the similarities in the progress of the three sports in Japan, Yamamoto replied: "Although we do not see a direct link, we believe that the High Performance Center initiatives of the Japanese Sports Council (JSC) have had a positive impact on the strategic planning of each organization."

Moreover, Yamamoto emphasized the importance of perseverance, stating it is something they are aware of in terms of developing their sports.

Expressing respect for Chinese basketball, Yamamoto said: "China's national teams have young and talented players. Let us work and develop together to raise the level of Asian basketball."

XINHUA

OLYMPICS

Boxing's LA Games hopes on the ropes

LAUSANNE, Switzerland — The International Olympic Committee on Wednesday said it needs to find a suitable new international boxing body by early next year or else risk boxing dropping out of the Olympics for the Los Angeles Games in 2028.

The IOC stripped the International Boxing Association of the right to run the Olympic boxing tournaments in Tokyo in 2021 and Paris this year.

On Tuesday, the Court of Arbitration for Sport upheld the IOC's decision to formally derecognize the IBA, in effect cutting it out of the Olympic Movement altogether.

The IOC has long cited concerns about the IBA's governance and the integrity of how boxing matches are refereed and judged. Last year, it also accused the IBA's Russian president Umar Kremlev of using "violent and threatening language" about IOC personnel.

"Because of the universality and high social inclusivity of boxing, the IOC wants it to continue to feature on the program of the Olympic Games," the IOC said on Wednesday.

"Unfortunately, this is far from certain for the Olympic Games LA 2028 because, for governance reasons, the IOC is not in a position to organize another Olympic boxing tournament. To keep boxing on the Olympic program, the IOC needs a recognized and reliable international federation as a partner, as with all the other Olympic sports."



The IBA feels that disregarding these (internal reforms) and other improvements suggests a biased view."

Statement by the International Boxing Association, led by Russia's Umar Kremlev (above)

The IOC called on national boxing bodies and Olympic committees to help set up a new international governing body for boxing. To keep boxing in the Olympics for Los Angeles, "the IOC needs to have a partner international federation for boxing by early 2025," it said.

The IOC didn't name any candidates but the likeliest might be World Boxing, a breakaway body backed by boxing officials in the United States and Britain which split from the IBA last year and elected its own president, Boris van der Vorst of the Netherlands.

World Boxing has started hosting its own tournaments and said it had members from 27 nations and territories when it held a congress in November. In response to the IOC statement, World Boxing said it was "the last remaining hope" for boxing at the Olympics.

"This is an urgent situation and the clock is ticking," World Boxing said on Wednesday and called for more national boxing bodies to join the organization. "We urge every one of them that cares about boxers and the future of the sport to apply to join and support World Boxing in its efforts to ensure boxing remains at the heart of the Olympic Movement, before it is too late."

The IBA said on Wednesday it was considering whether to file an appeal to the Swiss Federal Supreme Court against the CAS ruling, which it said had failed to appreciate the IBA's own reforms.

"The IBA feels that disregarding these and other improvements suggests a biased view," the IBA said.

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