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CHINA WATCH

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Chinese students teach a high school student from Washington state how to play *guqin*, a classical Chinese instrument, at Peking University in Beijing in March. YIN GANG / XINHUA

Growth of 5.3% in GDP higher than expected

China's economy grew more strongly than expected in the first quarter though pressures and challenges from insufficient demand persist, bolstering the case for more policy stimulus to consolidate the recovery trend.

Officials and analysts said policymakers are likely to introduce more supportive measures for the real economy to grow and to restore consumer confidence and tackle property woes. Potential moves include increasing support to bolster emerging industries, as well as for completing unfinished pre-sold homes and allocating more resources to support household spending, they said.

Projections indicate a potential acceleration in China's GDP growth in the second quarter, given the low comparison base. However, analysts cautioned that strong stimulus efforts must persist, and they called for continued fiscal and monetary support in the coming months.

China's GDP grew 5.3% year-on-year in the first quarter of this year, the National Bureau of Statistics said.

Sheng Laiyun, deputy head of the bureau, said that strong performance was led by a notable improvement in industry and services.

China's value-added industrial output rose 6.1% year-on-year in the first quarter, after rising 4.6% last year, the bureau said. Fixed-asset investment rose 4.5% in the first three months year-on-year, and the value of retail sales rose 4.7% in the same period.

"The economy will continue the recovery trend, underpinned by global economic recovery, stepped-up policy support and the anticipated strong holiday business," Sheng said.

China's housing market is still being adjusted, he said, and more will be done to increase support for the development of the real economy, foster emerging

industries and boost consumer confidence.

Lu Ting, chief China economist at Nomura, said that while China's first-quarter real GDP growth beat expectations, March activity figures were well below expectations.

"Activity data may drop further from March on weak momentum. Some sectors, especially exports, may hold up relatively well on falling prices and robust external demand."

The country may adopt more forceful measures to deal with the property woes in coming months, especially regarding support for completing unfinished pre-sold homes, he said.

China's economy is affected by the downturn in its property sector, the International Monetary Fund's latest World Economic Outlook said. China's economy will grow 4.6% this year, unchanged from the previous forecast in January, the IMF forecast.

Louise Loo, lead economist at the British think tank Oxford Economics, said her team expects government bond issuance to pick up in the third quarter.

Despite fluctuations last month, Zhou Maohua, a researcher at China Everbright Bank, said he believes the economy is well on track for a steady recovery in the coming months, given the continued recovery in industrial production and investment and the gradual improvement in consumption.

China "still has ample policy space to bolster the world's second-largest economy", he said.

On the monetary front, Huang Yiping, dean of the National School of Development at Peking University, said the United States Federal Reserve may cut the policy rate this year, which "should also create more room for the People's Bank of China to ease monetary policy if it wants to".

— OUYANG SHUI AND LIU ZHIHUA

New vistas open up for excited U.S. students

Isaiah Long, a student from the United States, said his mind has changed by leaving preconceived notions and biases at the door after he visited China recently.

"Going in head first and getting true experiences and opinions", is the way to go, said Long, an 11th grader at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Washington state.

Long made his remarks after returning from an 11-day trip from March 17 to March 27 to China with 23 other high school students. They visited Beijing, Shiyang in Hubei province and Guangzhou and Shenzhen in Guangdong province.

"When I had any biases or preconceived notions about China out of the way, it allowed me to experience China better," Long said. "The best way to experience the country and learn knowledge about a country is going to the country itself and meeting the people."

In November President Xi Jinping announced that China would invite 50,000 young people from the United States

to visit over the next five years. All 24 students, 10 from Lincoln High School and 14 from nearby Steilacoom High School, were visiting China for the first time.

In Beijing they visited landmarks such as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City as well as venues that hosted the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and the Winter Olympics in 2022.

The students also visited the campuses of several Chinese schools, including Tsinghua University High School and Capital University of Physical Education and Sports, both in Beijing, and Shenzhen Nanshan Foreign Language Senior High School in Shenzhen.

"I like China and I think it's very beautiful," said Annaliese Colbaugh, an 11th grader at Lincoln High School. "I loved seeing all the landmarks and ... the people are really welcoming and kind."

Colbaugh said her grandfather had thought it would be unsafe for her to go to China.

"I did hear some negative stuff while I was here (at

home), but I went there and it opened my eyes ... After I came back then I just ... explained to him about the whole trip and about how it's probably one of the safest places I've been to. ... It really changed his perspective on China."

Her favorite part of the trip, she said, was visiting the schools and seeing how they are run. She still talks to a lot of her friends in China on WeChat, she said.

"I definitely probably would go to China again with my family. I told (them) it was such a good place, and I would love to go back there. But it would be with them."

Jersey Jefferson, an 11th grader at Lincoln High School, said her stay in Beijing was "like home".

"The weather was more like Washington, so it didn't feel like I was really far, far away from home. Everyone was super kind, and I felt accepted out there, so I definitely enjoyed myself."

SEE TOUR, PAGE 4

RELICS TUMBLE OUT OF WALL AT GROTTOS

Archaeologists have made a stunning discovery of more than 80 stone carvings and building units, dating back about 1,300 years, at the Leigutai caves of the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang, Henan province.

The Longmen Grottoes Research Institute, which oversees the UNESCO World Heritage Site, made the announcement as the Leigutai caves reopened to the public this month after renovation.

The relics, found during renovation inside the west wall of the south cave of Leigutai, which sits on the east hill of the grottoes, are believed to have been used as materials to strengthen the wall during restoration work after an earthquake struck the area in the 16th century.

"This is the first time archaeologists have found statues inside a wall at the Longmen Grottoes," said Lu Wei, director of the history and humanities research center of the institute.

The first grottoes were built in 493. In the 14 centuries that followed, rulers of different dynasties and numerous pilgrims kept expanding their scale. There are now more than 2,300 caves and niches on the steep cliffs of two hills flanking the Yihe River.

The Leigutai site, boasting three major parallel caves and dozens of smaller caves and niches, was built on the east hill during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (690-705) of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

Lu said that workers engaged in the recent renovation project noticed a bulge on the west wall of the south cave.

When they pulled down the wall they found an array of exquisite stone statues, pottery statuettes used for decorating rooftops and bearing stones used to support doors, he said.

A well-preserved stone Buddha head, 15 inches high and 8.7 inches wide, is among the finds.

"The face is round, plump and has a particularly serene expression," Lu said. "The hair is like tidal waves. The head sculpture is exquisitely carved."

"Judging from the overall appearance, it has a distinctive artistic style associated with the zenith of the Tang Dynasty, which indicates that it belongs to a period between the late 7th century and the early 8th century."

The relics were stacked up and embedded in the wall, which is not originally from the Tang Dynasty. Judging from its appearance and use of materials, the wall was built much later during renovations, Lu said, adding that the bricks used to build the wall were from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Combining historical records about a powerful earthquake in Henan during the reign of Emperor Jiajing (1522-1566) of the Ming Dynasty, the epicenter of which was not far from Luoyang, archaeologists have



Archaeologists clean a stone Buddha head that was discovered at the Leigutai caves of the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang, Henan province, in November. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

made a preliminary finding that the wall was rebuilt after the temblor.

The relics found inside the wall were probably part of cave debris after the quake, Lu said. When masons rebuilt the wall they used these as infill for better foundational strength, and to save some bricks.

The discovery has shed light on Buddhist statue art during the Tang Dynasty, the devel-

opment of the Leigutai area, ancient social and economic development and religious practices, he said.

In November 2000 the Longmen Grottoes were included on the UNESCO World Heritage list, the first such honor for an archaeological site in Henan. They form the 25th world cultural heritage site in China.

— WANG RU

SOCIETY

Various-sized oxen made of bamboo strips with colorful cloth for the head and tail danced to the accompaniment of gongs and drums. Farmers dressed in distinctive Dong outfits holding plows and whips followed closely in their wake.

The performance took place as part of recent spring celebrations in Guangnan village, Longsheng autonomous county of various ethnic groups in Guilin in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, which is home to many ethnic minorities.

For centuries, the dancing spring oxen have not only been viewed as divine by the villagers, but have also embodied their hopes for better lives in the new year.

Mountains, scarce farmland, and poor transportation once sealed Guangnan off from the outside world, and with just a few acres of paddy fields, local residents used to struggle to make ends meet, which is why the cow is the villagers' best helper, said Wang Kaiqi.

"We have a profound respect and love for cattle," the villager in his 70s said.

In the past, residents were impoverished, only able to grow crops like rice and ginger to earn a meager living. Things have significantly changed over the past decade, since the local government encouraged them to expand into new crops and to take advantage of the area's beautiful countryside and ethnic cultures to develop tourism.

Today, oxen are no longer important agricultural tools, and the narrow rural paths they used to plow have turned into wide roads, along which agricultural machinery and all sorts of small cars shuttle back and forth.

Since 2021, Guangnan has been Longsheng's model for rural vitalization and more than 10 million yuan (\$1.38 million) has been invested to upgrade roads, river embankments and traditional homes. As a result, the village has attracted visitors from institutes of higher learning across the country on learning tours.

Meng Yongfan, who was one of the first residents to start a homestay and catering business for visitors, now



Villages vitalized by terraces to heaven



Clockwise from top: The picturesque terraced farmlands in Dazhai village, Longsheng county, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. WANG CHENGLIN / FOR CHINA DAILY Local people demonstrate making folk costumes at the cloth sun-drying festival in the village. WEI JIYANG / FOR CHINA DAILY Residents carry goods through a field of rapeseed flowers. HUANG LIUJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

brings in more than 300,000 yuan a year.

A dozen restaurants and homestays have sprung up since, to meet increased demand from travelers from China and abroad, Meng said.

Guangnan is just the tip of the widespread transformation that has taken place across Longsheng.

In 2023, Longsheng county received 10.11 million visits, an increase of 67.27% compared to the previous year, and tourism spending reached 12.6 billion yuan, an increase of 66.35% year-on-

year, according to county authorities.

About 56 miles away to the southeast, residents of Dazhai village earned collective tourism dividends of 7.25 million yuan last year.

This was a big contrast from the 25,000 yuan they earned in 2003, the 147,000 yuan in 2008, and the 1 million in 2013, said Yu Qiongtong, a senior official of the Dazhai village.

Surrounded by mountains on all sides, there was once only a muddy path leading out of the village. People

carried goods on their backs or on mules and lived in stilt houses that were drafty and leaked when it rained. Now, local authorities have managed to turn those basic conditions into attractions.

For example, Dazhai boasts around 25 square miles of terraced fields that have been cultivated for around 2,300 years. They follow the terrain of the mountains, at heights ranging from 980 to 3,940 feet above sea level. From swiftly flowing river valleys to mist-covered mountains, dense forests and steep cliffs,

wherever there is water and soil, terraces have been dug.

Those in Dazhai are important representatives of Longji terracing, a well-known type of terrace that can be found all over the county.

"The highest tier has more than 1,100 levels, winding from the foot of the mountain to the top, creating a magnificent landscape that resembles a staircase to the clouds," Yu said.

The largest terrace is no more than an acre in size, while the smallest only accommodates a handful of rice seedlings.

Longji terraces are based on an environmental practice that focuses on harmony between humans and nature and the dynamic balance of forests and fields.

It is an important model of ancient Chinese water management and agricultural civilization that has been passed down to the present day, Yu said.

Visitors can appreciate the way the Zhuang and Yao ethnic groups have farmed the terraces and how ancestral farming methods have been preserved.

Every year in April, villagers begin a series of agricultural activities such as planting and harvesting that have given rise to celebrations.

These festivities have become a rich resource for developing tourism, Yu said.

Lu Chulong, a writer based in Guilin, has been focusing on Longji terraces for two years.

"They are not just beautiful landscapes but also carriers of Zhuang and Yao culture," Lu said.

"The stories, history, traditions, and beliefs there are closely related to the land, from ancient villages to magnificent terraces, from hardworking farmers to the culture passed down through generations."

Yu said that today, many other areas with terraced landscapes come to Longsheng for tips on development.

In 2022, the village was named among the Best Tourism Villages by the World Tourism Organization, thanks to its achievements in balancing tourism and economic development, while protecting the environment.

— YANG FEIYUE

Fish farms turn murky waters clear

The once murky waters found in lakes and reservoirs across Northeast China's Liaoning province are being made clear again thanks to the help of a partner found in Mother Nature — fish.

The Liaoning Water Resource Management Group in 2016 began implementing a plan to establish fish farms in algae-plagued water bodies to improve water quality and provide a secondary source of revenue.

Algal blooms emerge as nitrogen and phosphorus build up in lakes, reservoirs and other slow-moving waters due to agricultural runoff and contamination from untreated urban sewage.

The blooms endanger the ecosystem of freshwater lakes and can cause taste and odor problems in waters used for drinking.

The blooms endanger the ecosystem of freshwater lakes and can cause taste and odor problems in waters used for drinking.

The water management group, which operates 16 reservoirs across Liaoning and supplies nearly 70% of the province's water, has long wrestled with algae.

By introducing fish into water bodies, the water resource group is able to control algal blooms, clean up the water and then re-catch the fish to sell on the market once they've reached maturity.

In recent years, provinces such as Yunnan, Anhui and Shandong, where fresh-water lakes are abundant, have also rolled out similar programs.

However, these programs'



Farmed fish are netted from the Guanying Reservoir in Benxi, Liaoning province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

\$9.86 million
additional revenue made from fish farms of the Liaoning Water Resource Management Group in 2023

custodians have warned the process is not as simple as it seems.

"Not all fish can thrive in reservoirs," said Guan Wankai, who oversees the group's operations at Guanying Reservoir in Benxi, southeast Liaoning.

Guo said to make the program work, the group has looked to filter-feeding fish including carp and types of catfish, that guzzle particles suspended in the water.

He said the fish in Guanying Reservoir are mostly silver and bighead carp.

Citing research data, the official said harvesting 2.2lb of carp is equivalent to removing about 0.04lb of nitrogen, 0.003lb of phosphorus and 0.26lb of carbon from the water. When calculated by the biomass of algae, 88lb are eliminated from the water with 2.2lb of fish caught.

The group said it had released 8,758 short tons of carp and other species across Liaoning by last year, and the harvest amounted to 30,975 short tons.

In 2023, 5,070 short tons of fish were caught, with the group raking in an additional 71 million yuan (\$9.86 million), it said.

Official figures show that 52% of the country's freshwater aquaculture areas are lakes and reservoirs, which produce about one-fifth of China's freshwater catch.

These fish, especially those from reservoirs, are commonly referred to as "ecological fish" due to their health benefits.

China is the world's fourth largest organic food producer by growing area, and sales of such food reached 87.7 billion yuan in 2022, according to a report by the State Administration of Market Regulation.

The group said many of its fish products had been certified organic.

"With living standards increasing, consumers now prefer organic fish raised in open waters," the group said.

"Our fish business has a bright future ahead."

— LI LEI AND WUYONG

Plateau species protected

Wu Xiaomin is the first scientist in China to conduct scientific investigations into the summer birthing grounds of Tibetan antelopes. Over the past decade, he has traveled to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau many times, gradually unraveling the mystery of Tibetan antelope migration.

The Tibetan antelope is listed as a first-class protected wild animal in China and was classified as near threatened in the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species in 2016.

Excessive hunting, human activities and habitat changes have posed threats to the birthing and migration of Tibetan antelopes, which led to a rapid decline in their population. However, over the past few years, the situation has been changing.

Wu, now a senior expert at the Shaanxi Institute of Zoology of Shaanxi province, said that as a result of conservation measures implemented for Tibetan antelope habitats, their population has steadily increased. As of last year, the population of Tibetan antelopes in China exceeded 300,000.

In 2003, Wu's team conducted scientific investigations into the unique wildlife

on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, especially monitoring the activity patterns of wildlife during the construction of the Qinghai-Xizang Railway.

Over the past 20 years, Wu and his team have gained a clearer understanding of the migration routes of Tibetan antelopes by using traditional tracking and monitoring methods, as well as the latest technological means, including satellite navigation and intelligent camera systems.

Observations indicate that female Tibetan antelopes exhibit seasonal reproductive migration behavior. The mating period for Tibetan antelopes occurs from mid-November to mid-December, and the young are born from mid-June to early July the following year.

"Tibetan antelope calves start migrating with their mothers from birth, and only about 30% of those that survive have the best genes, allowing this population to persist in the unique and harsh natural conditions of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau," Wu said.

"I have always believed that there is no end to the study of them."

— YAN DONGJIE

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BUSINESS

Visitors will benefit from payments revamp

China is expected to step up efforts to facilitate a seamless payment mechanism for foreigners and the elderly, and create a more friendly, inclusive and multichannel payment environment, experts and business leaders say.

This is not only part of the country's continued opening-up endeavor, but is also conducive to improving the payment infrastructure so as to accelerate the building of a unified domestic market, as well as boosting consumption and people's livelihoods, they said.

On March 28 the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, and the Beijing municipal government discussed improving payment services, as part of the country's strong push to simplify the payment process for foreign visitors and improve the business climate.

On March 7 the State Council issued a guideline on coordinating the efforts of various authorities on improving payment services and making paying for goods and services more convenient, so as to better meet the payment needs of the elderly and foreign visitors.

The guideline, approved by the State Council executive meeting on Feb 23, called for efforts among authorities to promote the acceptance of foreign bank cards, guarantee the use of cash, improve mobile payment convenience and further protect consumer rights while choosing payment methods and optimizing account services.

The People's Bank of China has outlined plans for putting in place the appropriate measures.

On March 14 the bank published a payment guide providing foreigners with text and graphic instructions on using bank cards, cash, mobile payment and e-CNY in China.

No identification is required for transactions below a certain amount when foreigners use mobile payments such as Alipay, Weixin Pay and UnionPay. Some international e-wallets, such as TrueMoney of Thailand, and Naver Pay, used frequently in South Korea, will be directly accepted by many merchants in China. Foreigners can also open bank accounts with passports or other valid identification at major banks such as Indus-



Visitors purchase cashmere products through mobile payment methods in Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"For any inbound traveler, behaviors are very difficult to change, and that (payment service) is a huge area still worth investment and development."

LING HAI

trial and Commercial Bank of China.

At a meeting on March 15 the People's Bank of China called on financial institutions in Shanghai to accelerate efforts and make more resources available to achieve more progress in facilitating foreign bank card acceptance, cash use, mobile payments and bank account services.

Recent efforts by the authorities and financial institutions will help remove various inconveniences and confusion encountered by foreigners staying in China. This is increasingly important because more foreigners will work or live in China amid the country's rapid economic development and deepened internationalization, said Liu Chunsheng, an associate professor in the School of International Trade and Economics at the Central University of Finance and Economics in Beijing.

This is also a sign that China

is devoted to promoting high-level opening up and is providing the world with more business opportunities, Liu said.

China Construction Bank said it has been customizing services for the elderly, bridging the digital divide, and it also supports various valid identification documents for card issuance and use by foreigners in China. Its ATMs accept foreign cards for cash withdrawals, and branches offer cash exchange services.

The bank said it will continue to improve foreign currency exchange capabilities, strengthen the acceptance environment for foreign card payments, and collaborate with UnionPay and international card organizations to set up innovative payment solutions and provide better service to foreigners in China.

The bank said it aims to promote the development and complementary use of various payment methods, including mobile payments, bank cards and cash, to build a compatible and synergistic payment service system.

Dong Ximiao, chief researcher at Merchants Union Consumer Finance, said financial institutions and local governments are likely to further raise awareness on the issue and create a more open, inclusive, and diverse payment system and environment for all groups of people.

"The choice of payment methods and the develop-

ment of payment tools should fully consider the differences between urban and rural areas and among different groups. It should not only be measured by quantity or speed, but also should respect the usage habits and rights of different groups of people."

The inconvenience experienced by some foreign visitors can be mainly attributed to the differences in payment habits between China and other countries, he said.

Dong called for China to further improve the acceptance environment for foreign bank cards, and gradually increase the number of point-of-sale terminals accepting foreign cards in key cities and important business districts.

International card organizations should reduce foreign card transaction fees and leave appropriate room for profitability for merchants, he said.

Ling Hai, president for the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, the Middle East and Africa at MasterCard, emphasized the importance of improving multiple payment channels to improve payment convenience for inbound travelers.

"The ecosystem in China has evolved into more digital wallet and QR-based, but that's not how the rest of the world works. For any inbound traveler, behaviors are very difficult to change, and that is a huge area still worth investment and development."

— LIU ZHIHUA AND ZHOU LANXU

Consumption expo set to bolster growth

China's consumption market still holds enormous potential, and digital, green and healthy consumption are expected to become important drivers to promote the expansion of the market and boost economic growth.

Industry experts and top executives made the remarks at the fourth China International Consumer Products Expo in Haikou, Hainan province, this month.

Fueled by the massive consumption growth potential of the country, major foreign companies said they would continue to increase investment in Hainan Free Trade Port and inject new vitality into the China market.

The French spirits and wine maker Pernod Ricard, attending the expo for the fourth consecutive year, said it would continue to deepen the market layout in Hainan and promote sustainable development in the province.

The group, which enjoyed 6% year-on-year growth in China last year, said it will focus on premium and diversified products in the years to come.

"Pernod Ricard has witnessed Hainan's rapid development and vitality," said Jerome Cottin-Bizonne, chief executive officer of Pernod Ricard China.

"We're looking forward to introducing more high-quality products and exquisite experiences to the Chinese market. China is Pernod Ricard's second-largest market, where we have had a presence for over 30 years. We will respond promptly to an ever-evolving market demand in the country."

The consumer expo is China's first significant international expo this year and the largest consumer expo in the Asia-Pacific region in terms of scale. More than 4,000 brands, a record high, from 71 countries and regions attended this year's event.

\$1.66

trillion

China's total retail sales of consumer goods in the first quarter of the year

Sheng Qiuping, vice-minister of commerce, said China has a population of 1.4 billion and a middle-income group of more than 400 million people, and per capita annual GDP has exceeded \$12,000, making it a consumer market with the highest growth potential globally.

The Chinese economy is highly resilient, has great potential and vitality, and the long-term growth fundamentals are unchanged, he said.

In the first quarter of this year total retail sales of consumer goods in the country were worth 12.03 trillion yuan (\$1.66 trillion), 4.7% more than in the corresponding period last year, the National Bureau of Statistics said.

Denis Cheng, consumer sector leader of Ernst & Young China, said the Ministry of Commerce has designated 2024 as the year of consumption promotion, and this year will be important in stimulating consumption potential, expanding consumption scale and improving consumption quality.

The skin care group Estee Lauder of the United States said Hainan is one of the most popular travel destinations, and it has provided exciting business growth opportunities for global retail brands.

Israel Assa, global president of travel retail at Estee Lauder Companies, said that last year Estee Lauder built its travel retail headquarters for China in Haikou to support its travel retail business in the country and the Asia-Pacific region.

The company's research and development center in Shanghai plans to develop more beauty products catering to Chinese consumers, he said.

— ZHU WENQIAN

Green thumb aficionados discover flower power

Chinese have been increasingly buying flowers and plants to buoy emotions and beautify living spaces as they pursue more diversified and niche varieties, fueling rosy business growth for retailers.

So far this year more than 100 million people have bought flowers, plants and related gardening goods on Alibaba's e-commerce platform Taobao, with nearly 60% of such customers being female.

The number of buyers has risen three years in a row, said a joint report by the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University of China in Beijing, Taobao and Tmall Group.

The traditional notion that flower and plant buyers are mainly those with plenty of free time has changed in recent years. Busy urban consumers have found spiritual sustenance in tending to flowers and houseplants in their leisure time, the report said.

China is the world's largest producer of flowers and an important trader and consumer of them. The country has more than 5,000 large-scale flower companies, and about 5.3 million people are involved in the industry, the China

Flower Association said.

Shi Xin, 34, owner of Plant X, an online store that mainly sells tropical plants, said its sales revenue was 20 million yuan (\$2.77 million) last year, driven by increasing demand for beautiful tropical plants by those who want more exotic decor in their homes and workplaces.

Sales of Chinese plants such as blue jacaranda and *Acorus calamus*, suitable for home embellishment with their distinct appearances, have surged online recently. Tropical plants such as green velvet alocasia and turtle-backed bamboo have increasingly become a part of the lifestyle of urban residents, the report said.

Shi launched an online store on Taobao in 2019 and quickly began hosting livestreaming sessions.

"Cultivating tropical plants is like buying pop toys for many young consumers, and they recognize the value of such plants. Sharing photos of plants with others is also a way of social networking. The repurchase rate of our plants is about 55%."

"We are bullish on the growth potential of tropical



Growers cut fresh flowers at a plantation base in Zhangye, Gansu province. WANG JIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

plants in China. Some experienced green thumbs even buy 100 or more potted plants each year, with many gifting their purchases. In addition, many people are still unfamiliar with the hobby, so there are likely to be more sales growth opportunities."

Most flower and plant buyers online are people aged between 30 and 49. Among them more than 40 million are high-income individuals. In particular, consumers in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, Guangdong province, are most enthusiastic about buying flowers, the report said.

The popularity of cultivating tropical plants in China has attracted more people to entrepreneurial endeavors in the industry.

Wu Jiafan, in his 30s, said he used to work in artificial intelligence in Shanghai and would

like to shift to a new career path.

As luck would have it, he found that the market for online sales of tropical plants is less competitive compared with many other sectors, so he opened Jojo Plant, an online store, on Taobao in 2019.

"This is a beautiful and green sector that is full of positive energy. A few years ago tropical plants were more expensive and scarce, so the industry is full of growth opportunities."

"Tropical plants fit with young consumers' aesthetic demand for something novel and tasteful, and every pot is different. Many plants are synonymous with trends, and some celebrities like to buy tropical plants, which is fueling consumption among young people online," he said.

— ZHU WENQIAN

LIFE



From left: Hanfu enthusiasts perform rituals in the Filoli Historic House and Garden near San Francisco. LIU YILIN / XINHUA Hanfu enthusiasts in front of Big Ben in London. LI YING / XINHUA

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The magic of traditional clothes, found down a rabbit hole

The traditional attire of the Han ethnic group in China, *hanfu*, boasts a history spanning nearly 4,000 years. In recent times there has been a resurgence of interest in *hanfu* in China and elsewhere as more people are drawn to wearing and analyzing it.

Rachel Yu, of Boston, said her introduction to *hanfu* came unexpectedly one day as she was browsing art documentaries online. It was a chance encounter with a *hanfu* video that captivated her.

"I was like, well, this is very cool, but I didn't think that much about it," she said, noting that the clothing stands out from many fashions she had seen.

Yu said she developed her interest in *hanfu* after marrying, her Chinese husband giving her first set of *hanfu* and teaching her about the traditional clothing.

"Then I was looking online at all the pictures, trying to learn, is this from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)?" Yu said. "Is this from the Tang Dynasty (618-907)? How do you style it? What hairstyle matches? How did they do their makeup? It's just like going down the internet rabbit hole and never coming back out."

Yu said she has accumulated a lot of knowledge about *hanfu*, but at first the research was difficult.

"It was very hard to research because there is almost nothing about *hanfu* in English to teach people about (the attire)."

Yu is now learning Chinese.

"As someone in America who wears *hanfu*, I think that shines a great positive light on Chinese culture, because a lot of people in America don't know much about China," she said, and her interest in *hanfu* brought her friendships with other lovers of the traditional



A student wears *hanfu* in Belgrade, Serbia. XINHUA

Chinese attire after she joined a *hanfu* club in Boston.

Yu wore *hanfu* for her wedding, and also wears it with her husband and friends during Chinese festivals and other important events, she said. She also likes to incorporate *hanfu*-related elements into her daily life.

"I just find it very interesting and also often functional as well. For example, the horseface dress is very convenient for daily use. I could just wear the skirt or just wear the vest and add it to your everyday outfit."

Yu said she has felt warmly welcomed by the *hanfu* community and believes that the "magic clothing" has helped her build many personal connections and friendships.

While bridging the people-to-people interest in the traditional dress, the *hanfu* community has become a global network.

Ming Liang, president of the



Rachel Yu and her husband dressed in *hanfu*. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

New York Hanfu Corporation, said there is a large *hanfu* club network across the U.S., with more than a dozen clubs in different states that operate independently but maintain regular connections.

Ming, studying folklore and having previously taught Chinese, has devoted herself to operating the club. The board of the *hanfu* nonprofit is made up of people from many different backgrounds, but they are brought together by a common interest.

Ming said the first time she took part in activities for Tomb Sweeping Day, which this year fell on April 4, was a memorable experience. This traditional festival is devoted to remembering and honoring the dead, but it also signifies the arrival of spring, during which people typically go on outings.

She was attracted to an activity organized by the *hanfu* club in Central Park, Manhat-

tan, she said, eager to see what it would be like.

"In their tiny space I felt a sense of sanctity. It's the reverence for ancestors, that mindset, which really moved me. And the ceremony was done so meticulously, using traditional rituals," she said.

For the group, *hanfu* is a hobby that brings people together, but individuals with similar backgrounds and interests get the chance to sit together and have deep, meaningful conversations about Chinese culture, beyond just taking photos.

Ming said that members of the club also share their interests in other aspects of Chinese culture. For example, they have a member who is an aficionado of Chinese tea culture and food culture, one who loves ancient Chinese poetry, and one who is interested in analyzing the pronunciation of ancient Chinese.

In California the Northern California Hanfu Association recently hosted Huazhao festival to celebrate the flower goddess' birthday, holding an event at the Filoli Historic House and Garden in the Bay Area of the town of Woodside.

The association is devoted to *hanfu* and cultural analysis, preparing an illustrated handbook to introduce the attire with pictures and English introductions to cater to more international admirers.

From artifacts and attire to detailed accessories and literature, they have gathered knowledge of *hanfu*, from the pre-Qin period (pre-221 B.C.) to the Ming Dynasty. They use easily understandable English to present the evolution and development of clothing and culture, documenting every detail and providing explanations for Chinese pinyin names of the garments to aid understanding.

—MINGMEI LI

Tour: Singing, dancing, painting and the Great Wall as well

From page 1

Jefferson said her favorite place was the Capital University of Physical Education and Sports in Beijing, where the U.S. student delegation was welcomed with a lion dance and *wushu* performance. She also enjoyed the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, she said, saying it was like "walking on history".

"I never thought I would ever get to walk on the Great Wall. ... I was, I would assume, one of the first people in my family to go to China. My grandmother was really excited. She wants to see all the pictures, she wants to hear all the things, she wants to see all the gifts."

Since her return she has encouraged many of her school friends to follow in her footsteps, she said.

Montserrat Romero-Rocha, a 12th-grade student at Lincoln

High School, said: "We got so many unique opportunities, and it's just amazing. ... It has changed my life."

It was her first time in China, but her older sister Abranna, who was also a student at Lincoln High School, was one of more than 100 students and teachers invited to China after Xi visited the school during his first state visit to the U.S. as Chinese president in 2015.

"I think the trip to China (in 2016) really influenced her. Ever since then, she's been exploring the world. China was her first avenue to see that. She was influenced and has continued to be influenced to go and see other places."

Abranna Romero-Rocha now works in Spokane as a college adviser and recently started law school.

The younger sister said one of her favorite parts of her own China trip was being involved

in everyday school life, and she told her family and friends about her more than five hours of interactions with Chinese peers at Shenzhen Nanshan Foreign Language Senior High School.

The school was the last stop before the delegation left China. Activities the U.S. students and their Chinese peers took part in included painting, dancing, singing and volleyball.

"(The Shenzhen visit) had a lot of impact on me because it was the last group of people that I was able to interact with before I left (China)," Montserrat Romero-Rocha said. "Everybody was just so sweet and kind and nice. And I have friends now from different schools that I talk to and keep up with."

She wants to return to China and stay at least six months or a year, she said.

Karl Hoseth, principal of Lincoln High School, said: "To see

them interact in a positive way with the students in China was just really heartwarming. It was such a fantastic, once-in-a-lifetime experience. I'm really hopeful for this type of thing in terms of how it can impact future generations."

Hoseth was at a banquet in San Francisco in November when Xi announced the initiative to have 50,000 U.S. students visit China.

"That was a huge help," Hoseth said. "I heard it in the audience and I thought that seems like that would be a great opportunity for our students at Lincoln. But I didn't have any idea that we would be among the very first to go and then have some more opportunities to send students here in the next several months."

From 2016 to 2019 three trips were made from Lincoln High School to China.

"Then it went on pause for

a while when the pandemic occurred, and so I'm just so grateful that we are now able to do it again and thankful for this initiative and those who have really helped us make this happen for our students," he said.

He would encourage people to visit China, he said, and thinks being exposed to different cultures, countries, ways of life and histories is invaluable.

"As a school, one of the things that I'm really excited about is that there is this long-standing connection between China and Lincoln High School, and in particular with President Xi, who visited in 2015.

"And so with that, there have been a number of groups that have wanted to help support having some of our students go back to China. So there is a possibility coming up in the summer where we'll be able to send some students to China again."

—LINDA DENG



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