

Saving wildlife

Rescued leopard cat cub sent back to natural habitat

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Mood toward NEV stocks brightens

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Baker's ability to depict real-life scenes makes her tasty treats popular online

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CHINA DAILY

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China, Serbia open new chapter of ties

WORLD WATCH
By Slavica Stamenic

Choice of destinations point to priorities

May 2024 is set to be an important month for Chinese diplomacy. This month, President Xi Jinping is visiting three European nations. These high-level interactions are likely to attract critical comments from some Western countries.

President Xi's European tour, which began in France, marks his first state visit to Europe in five years, following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. His itinerary also includes stops in Belgrade and Budapest. The choice of these particular European destinations is quite indicative. It probably reflects China's strategic priorities in Europe with regard to political and economic relations. France, Serbia and Hungary, while differing in their geopolitical positions and perspectives within Europe, share a common pragmatic attitude toward China.

France, alongside Germany, stands as one of the European Union's most influential member states and boasts an extensively

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THEATERS IN MALLS INJECT LIFE INTO PERFORMING ARTS

By CHEN NAN
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Almost a decade ago, impresario Song Jianping came up with the unconventional idea that modern-day shopping malls could help save classical music performances.

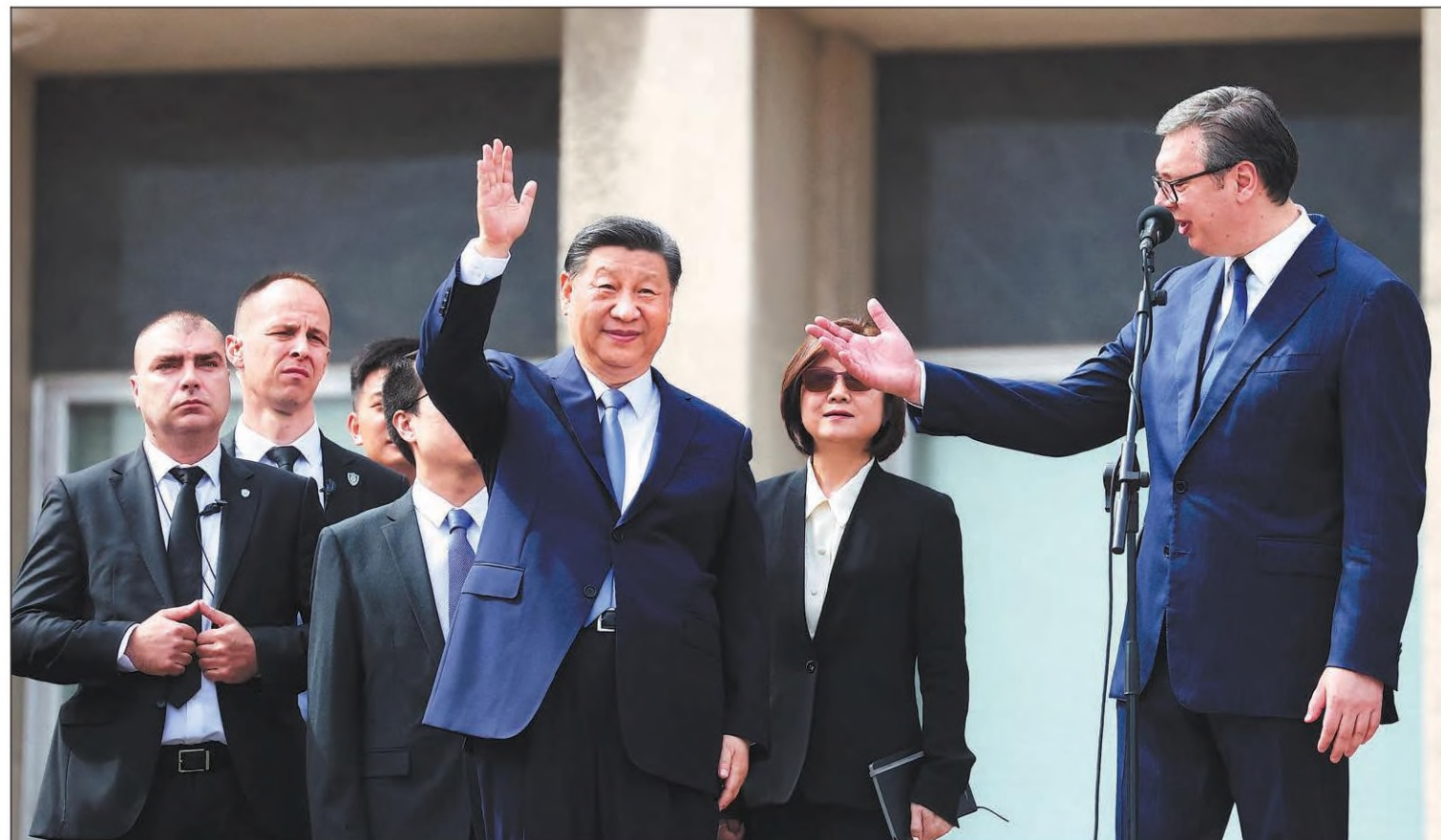
A show organizer friend of his who had just returned from a trip to Europe in 2015 to study the staging of classical music concerts told him most of the audiences at the performances were elderly people. "There is no hope for classical music," Song's friend declared.

in-depth

Song, 43, is founder and chairman of Music Fans, a Beijing-headquartered company that has organized 5,000 performances around the country for more than a decade. His friend's bleak prognosis for classical music concerts inspired the mall idea.

"Why not bring concerts closer to people, especially young people, which allows them to enjoy classical music more easily and comfortably?" Song said, noting that malls had the added attractions of grocery stores, fashion brands, cinemas, coffee shops and children's play areas.

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President Xi Jinping waves as Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic introduces him to the crowd at the Palace of Serbia in Belgrade on Wednesday during Xi's two-day state visit to Serbia. DJORDJE KOJADINOVIC / REUTERS

Xi receives grand welcome as he hails elevation of ironclad friendship

By XU WEI in Belgrade
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President Xi Jinping and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic underscored their shared commitment to building a China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era as the two nations upgraded their ironclad partnership on Wednesday.

The two heads of state signed a joint statement on the building of a China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era, making Serbia the first European country to build such a community with China, after their talks at the Palace of Serbia, the seat of the Serbian government.

In his first state visit to Belgrade in eight years, the Chinese president was offered a grand welcome, including a guard of honor, a 10-gun salute and a grand introduction by Vucic at a rally of 15,000 people gathered in front of the palace.

Serbia, after France, is the second stop on Xi's first visit to Europe in five years. The Chinese president left Belgrade for Budapest on Wednesday night.

Xi described the elevation of the ties as "opening a new chapter in China-Serbia relations".

The building of a China-Serbia community with a shared future in



Crowds wave Serbian and Chinese flags on Wednesday to welcome President Xi Jinping to Belgrade, Serbia. SUN YI / XINHUA

the new era represents the elevation of the ironclad friendship, and it also embodies the shared values and goals of both sides, he pointed out.

"Eight years ago, Serbia became China's first comprehensive strategic partner in Central and Eastern Europe. Today, Serbia becomes the first European country to build a community with a shared future with China. This speaks volumes about the strategic, special and high-level relationship between the two countries," Xi said while he and Vucic met with the media.

Xi announced a number of measures to support the building of a China-Serbia community with a shared future.

A bilateral free-trade agreement will take effect on July 1, while Bel-

grade will support Belgrade in hosting the Expo 2027 and send a delegation to attend the event, with Chinese businesses encouraged to take part in relevant construction projects.

China will import more high-quality agricultural specialties from Serbia, including dried prunes and blueberries, with the nation having already lifted restrictions on Serbian imports that had been related to highly pathogenic avian influenza.

Other key steps include supporting 50 young Serbian scientists in taking part in research exchanges in China, as well as supporting 300 young Serbians to study in China, in the next three years.

Xi also welcomed the opening of direct flights from Belgrade to Shanghai, saying that the two coun-

tries' airlines will be encouraged to open more direct flights.

The two sides will firmly support each other's core interests and major concerns, and cement the political foundation for building this community, he said.

"China supports Serbia in upholding its independence and following the development path that suits its own conditions. We will support Serbia in safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity on the Kosovo issue," he said.

"The two sides will continue to advocate fairness and justice and jointly oppose hegemonism and power politics," he told reporters.

During their talks, Xi called Vucic "my dear friend", saying that

his last visit in 2016 was still fresh in his memory.

He noted the "gratifying progress" in Belt and Road cooperation between China and Serbia. The Balkan country was home to the first bridge and the first highway constructed by Chinese companies in Europe, while the opening of the Belgrade- Novi Sad section of the 350-kilometer Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway in 2022 shortened the travel time for local residents.

Xi also called for joint efforts to advance cooperation in traditional sectors such as transportation and energy infrastructure, achieve the goal of launching the entire Serbian section of the Belgrade-Budapest railway on schedule, and jointly manage major cooperative projects effectively.

Vucic said that China is the sincerest friend of Serbia, and President Xi is a great world leader.

"We are grateful for the attention you pay to our country," said Vucic, who hailed the strategic partnership for providing Serbia with "unprecedented potential for development and progress".

The people of Serbia are filled with gratitude and respect toward China, especially President Xi, and they feel deeply proud and honored to have such a great country like China as a steadfast friend, he said.

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Xi talks of 'even brighter future' as he arrives in Hungary

By MO JINGXI
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President Xi Jinping expressed his wish to take the China-Hungary relationship to a higher level as he arrived in Budapest on Wednesday for a state visit to Hungary, the last stop in his three-nation trip to Europe.

"I look forward to meeting with President Tamas Sulyok, Prime Minister Viktor Orban and other Hungarian leaders," he said in a written statement upon his arrival at the airport.

During his visit, Xi will meet

with Sulyok and hold talks with Orban that will feature an in-depth exchange of views on China-Hungary relations and issues of mutual interest.

"We will jointly outline a new blueprint for cooperation and development, with a view to steering the China-Hungary relationship forward in big strides and taking it to a higher level," Xi said.

The Chinese president's visit came amid the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Hungary. Hungary was one of the first countries to recognize and establish diplomatic

relations with the People's Republic of China, back in 1949.

"In recent years, our two sides have seen frequent high-level exchanges, deepening mutual trust, fruitful outcomes in Belt and Road cooperation, vibrant people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and close coordination and collaboration in international and regional affairs," Xi said.

Last year, bilateral trade between China and Hungary hit \$14.52 billion and Chinese direct investment in Hungary was 7.6 billion euros (\$8.2 billion), accounting for 58 percent of Hungary's total foreign direct investment.

China once again, after 2020, became Hungary's largest source of foreign investment, according to a report released by the China Economic Information Service.

Hungary is also an important partner of China in Belt and Road cooperation and in China's cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries.

In the written statement, Xi said that the two countries have set a fine example of building a new type of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation.

"I believe that no matter how the

international landscape evolves, China and Hungary will always view and approach the bilateral relationship from a broad perspective and a long-term view," Xi said.

He also said that China and Hungary will work together toward the goal of building a community with a shared future for mankind, and make their due contribution to world peace, stability, development and prosperity.

"I am confident that, with the two sides' concerted efforts, this visit will be a complete success and usher in an even brighter future of the China-Hungary relationship," Xi said.

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XI'S VISIT



Chinese and Hungarian flags fly on Tuesday on the Elisabeth Bridge in Budapest, Hungary, ahead of President Xi Jinping's visit to the Central European country. BERNADETT SZABO / REUTERS

Xi applauds 'deep friendship'

75-year-old relationship with Hungary 'has embarked on a golden voyage'

By WANG QINGYUN
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President Xi Jinping has commended the staunch ties between China and Hungary over the past 75 years, and called on the two countries to carry on their friendship by enhancing cooperation in various fields.

In a signed article published on Wednesday in the Hungarian newspaper Magyar Nemzet, Xi said that China's relationship with Hungary "is at its best in history, and has embarked on a golden voyage".

Xi's visit to Hungary is his second trip to the Central European country in 15 years.

"Over the past 15 years, I have met with visiting Hungarian leaders on many occasions. We have forged a deep friendship," Xi said. "I very much look forward to returning to your country to renew our friendship and work with my friends on a new blueprint for China-Hungary relations and cooperation in the new era."

Noting that this year marks the 75th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations, Xi said the relationship has since been developing and growing steadily and soundly, with tangible results achieved in all fields.

"We see each other as a priority partner of cooperation. We have gone through hardships together and defied power politics together amid volatile international situations," Xi said.

The two countries have supported each other on issues that bear on their respective core interests and are of major concern to them, Xi said, adding that they have enjoyed a high degree of political mutual trust.

China and Hungary established diplomatic relations on Oct 6, 1949, days after the People's Republic of China was founded. The two countries signed an intergovernmental Belt and Road cooperation document in 2015, making Hungary the first European country to

have signed such an agreement with China.

Hungary is China's top investment destination in Central and Eastern Europe, while China is Hungary's largest trading partner outside Europe.

Calling bilateral cooperation "strong, fruitful, and dynamic", Xi said the two countries need to strengthen the political foundations of their ties.

"Stronger political mutual trust is the cornerstone of rapid and steady development of China-Hungary relations," he said, adding that the two countries should continue to firmly support each other on issues that involve their core interests.

Xi also encouraged the two countries to enhance communication on international affairs and work together to address global challenges.

"It is important that we stay committed to solidarity and collaboration, champion humanity's common values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy and freedom, and practice true multilateralism," he said.

Speaking of practical cooperation, Xi said that China will work

with Hungary to forge greater synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative and Hungary's Eastern Opening strategy, and accelerate the construction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway link.

China will also strengthen cooperation with the Central European country in clean energy, artificial intelligence, the digital economy, green development and other emerging areas, Xi said.

Hungary is a member of a mechanism of cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries, which was launched in 2012.

Xi said the cooperation is "an important complement to the overall China-Europe relationship", and that China stands ready to work with Hungary to deepen it.

Xi also called for China and Hungary to expand exchanges and cooperation in education, culture, tourism, sports, youth and the media, as well as at the subnational level.

China will continue to work with Hungary to upgrade mutual visa facilitation, expand direct flights, and facilitate people-to-people exchanges, he said.

Diplomat: Relations built on mutual trust

By CHEN WEIHUA in Budapest
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Chinese Ambassador to Hungary Gong Tao gave credit for the good relations between China and Hungary to guidance by the top leadership, growing political mutual trust and increasing strategic alignment.

He noted that President Xi Jinping and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban have held face-to-face meetings and phone talks several times and established a close working relationship and personal friendship.

"They have kept a firm grasp on the direction forward for China-Hungary relations and made a top-level design for the bilateral relations and cooperation in various fields," said Gong, who took the post in September.

He was involved in preparing for and receiving Orban's visit to China in October to attend the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation and other activities in China.

"I felt strongly the high degree of political mutual trust and deep friendship between the leaders of the two countries," he said.

During that visit, the two countries agreed to better align the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative and Hungary's Eastern Opening national strategy, a policy to increase Hungary's cooperation with countries in the East, including China. Orban and Premier Li Qiang also witnessed the signing of 10 documents on bilateral cooperation at that time.

In 2015, Hungary was the first European country to sign a BRI cooperation document with China.

Gong described the bilateral relationship as a role model for a new type of international relations.

"China has always regarded Hungary as a good friend and a good partner, with mutual trust and seeking win-win cooperation," he said.

He added that both countries support building connectivity and promoting an equal, orderly multipolar world and inclusive economic globalization, and both are unequivocally against decoupling or bloc confrontation.

"The fruitful achievements of China and Hungary's mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields



Gong Tao

have not only benefited the people of the two countries, they have also shown that China is an opportunity for Europe and not a challenge, and China is a partner and not a rival."

Gong said.

In 2023, bilateral trade between China and Hungary exceeded \$13 billion, and Chinese foreign direct investment in Hungary reached 7.6 billion euros (\$8.17 billion), accounting for 58 percent of the foreign direct investment in Hungary and creating more than 10,000 jobs.

Hungary has for years been the top destination of Chinese FDI in Central and Eastern Europe. China is Hungary's largest trading partner outside the European Union.

Chinese companies such as electric vehicle battery maker CATL and electric vehicle maker BYD are racing ahead with investment projects in Hungary, while a solar power plant funded and built by China National Machinery Import & Export Corp in Kaposvar in southwestern Hungary has begun operations.

Gong said that more Chinese companies in the fields of electric vehicles, lithium batteries and solar energy have made Hungary a "bridgehead" into the EU market.

"They have not only contributed to the Hungarian economy and job creation, but also helped upgrade Hungary's manufacturing sector to make Hungary more competitive in the international marketplace," he said.

Gong emphasized the importance of people-to-people exchanges, citing a long list of activities that have brought the two peoples closer together to lay a solid foundation for bilateral cooperation. Hungary is host to five Confucius Institutes and a Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school.

"President Xi's upcoming state visit to Hungary, the first by China's head of state in 20 years and Xi's first visit to Hungary as Chinese president, will become a milestone of great significance for the bilateral relationship," Gong said. Xi also visited Hungary in 2009 when he was Chinese vice-president.

Sino-Hungarian bonds 'getting closer and closer'

By CHEN WEIHUA in Budapest
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Balazs Orban, political director of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, said that relations between Hungary and China are "very good" and "the two countries are getting closer and closer".

On his visit to China in October, the Hungarian prime minister was accompanied by the political director. The two Orbanes are not related.

China and Hungary are marking the 75th anniversary of their diplomatic ties this year.

"We think that it has a culture of a people-to-people basis. Our countries have been working together for 75 years and it has always been the case," Balazs Orban told China Daily in an interview at Mathias Corvinus Collegium, a large private education institution in Budapest where he is the chairman of the board of trustees.

Balazs Orban said that Hungary sees China as an emerging power that is getting stronger and stronger. During the October visit, he was amazed by China's achievements in technology, economic development and efforts to preserve cultural heritage.

He described the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative put forward by President Xi Jinping a decade ago as a very attractive idea for Hungary from the beginning, because Hungary also believes in building connectivity and seeking practical cooperation.

Prime Minister Orban introduced the Eastern Opening strategy in 2010 to expand economic and trade ties with the East.

Balazs Orban said that there is a lot of potential for mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Hungary. He was happy to see the two leaders have "very good personal connections" and he hopes such personal ties will help further strengthen



Balazs Orban

Hungarian-Chinese relations.

Under the leadership of President Xi and Prime Minister Orban, the political director said that Chinese-Hungarian relations are "flourishing" based on pragmatic and win-win cooperation.

He said that Hungarians are "very honored and delighted" that Xi is visiting the country. "So we hope that this visit will be a perfect opportunity to finalize new projects where we can mutually benefit," he said.

Balazs Orban said he believes the European Union should also work like this with the rest of the world to boost mutual trust and seek practical economic cooperation, clearly referring to the growing tensions in EU-China relations.

The political director said that during his latest visit, he was impressed that Hungary and China have a very similar mindset regarding the changing world order and how international relations should be based on national interest, mutual trust, respect and economic connectivity.

He said he was puzzled why some in the West want to cut ties, form political blocs and prefer a new kind of Cold War.

"This is all against the interest of Europe and definitely against the interest of Hungary," he added. Unlike some EU politicians, Balazs Orban said that Hungary does not see China as a competitor or political enemy. "We try to do everything to convince our European partners that if Europe wants to play an important role in the 21st century, we have to find a way based on mutual respect with the rest of the world, including China," said Balazs Orban, who is also a member of the National Assembly, the Hungarian parliament.

Choral singing method transforms lives in Hunan

By CHEN NAN
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Zhou Baoyu still remembers the first time she was captivated by the melodic vocal performances of choral singing, when the big loudspeaker of the broadcast station in her village played *In the Field of Hope*, a joyful song composed by 20th century Chinese songwriter Shi Guangan.

As someone who was born and brought up in a small village in Anhua county, Hunan province, Zhou had never heard choral singing before and was intrigued.

In 1995, she left her native village and went to high school in the town, where she saw a piano for the first time. On hearing Zhou's beautiful voice one day, her music teacher encouraged her to overcome her natural shyness and become the lead vocalist of the school's choir.

That planted the seed of music in Zhou's heart, and she went on to become a music teacher in a primary school in Anhua in 2014.

She founded a choir in the school, which however was put on pause in 2017. As she recalls, though the children loved choral singing, the level and method of teaching choral singing were not up to the mark in the small village.

In 2019, Zhou was able to relaunch the choir in the school thanks to Edit Lanczky, a music teacher associated with the Beijing Hungarian Cultural Institute, who came to the school along with her Hungarian colleagues not only to teach the children how to sing, but also to train the local music teachers to make choral singing a part of



Edit Lanczky, a Hungarian music teacher, gives a choir lesson to students at a primary school in Anren county, Hunan province, in August 2020. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

the school's music education programs.

The technique that Lanczky used to teach choral singing is known as the Kodaly method, a pioneering music education approach based on the work of Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly (1882-1967).

The method, which embraces the key principle of learning by singing with the human voice as the fundamental instrument, was inscribed on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2016. It also involves hand signs, rhythmic proficiency, creative collaborations and cultural connections.

According to Lanczky, in Kodaly's time, pianos were not commonly available to Hungarian families.

Consequently, the style of singing without instrumental accompaniment, known as a cappella, was utilized. Many ancient Hungarian ballads were passed down through generations, unaccompanied by music.

"For children, the vocalized sound is natural, but using musical instruments isn't," she told China Daily during an interview in 2020. "That's why the Kodaly method isn't restricted by spaces and conditions."

Zhou, the Anhua music teacher, said that for children in rural areas, it is a luxury to learn music, as musical instruments are expensive and the level of music education is not as high as that of big cities.

"Singing is the simplest and

most direct way for children to learn and enjoy music," she said, adding that Lanczky and her colleagues used several engaging techniques such as role-playing games to make learning music fun for the students.

"For local music teachers like me, we learned from them how to train the children to sing in a choir using hand signs," said Zhou, 44.

Chen Chenxi, a music teacher from Hunan's Anren county, also received training in the Kodaly method.

"Children make friends when they sing in choirs. They do rehearsals every week. It inspires them to do better in other classes," said Chen, 32, who was introduced to choral singing in university and fell in love with the art form.

The Hungarian music teachers, led by Lanczky, were invited to China by the Beijing Deqing Foundation, a charity devoted to improving education in the country's rural areas.

Nearly 2,000 Chinese music teachers and students attended the classes held by Lanczky and her colleagues both online and in-person during the past five years, said Li Kemei, founder of the charity, who met Lanczky in 2018 and initiated the idea of inviting her and the others to offer music lessons to Chinese teachers and children in rural areas.

"We believe that music should be accessible to everyone. I feel very touched and proud when I see the smiles on children's faces, when they sing in a choir. In fact, singing in a choir is beyond music itself. The children become more confident and sociable," Li said.

XI'S VISIT



President Xi Jinping, his wife Peng Liyuan, French President Emmanuel Macron, and his wife Brigitte Macron pose for a picture with villagers of Col du Tourmalet in southwestern France on Tuesday. YAO DAWEI / XINHUA



President Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan, meet on Tuesday with French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife, Brigitte Macron, at the L'Etape du Berger restaurant in Col du Tourmalet in southwestern France. YAO DAWEI / XINHUA

FORGING FRIENDSHIPS



President Xi Jinping and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic walk down the red carpet during a welcoming ceremony in Belgrade on Wednesday. WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY



Top: Peng Liyuan, wife of President Xi Jinping, visits the National Museum of Serbia along with Serbian first lady Tamara Vucic in Belgrade on Wednesday. WANG YE / XINHUA

Right: Serbian children wave Chinese and Serbian flags in honor of President Xi Jinping in Belgrade on Tuesday. WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY



Top: President Xi Jinping and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic hold discussions with their delegations in Belgrade on Wednesday. LI XUEREN / XINHUA

Left: President Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan, arrive at Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport on Tuesday. Among those welcoming them were Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and his wife, Tamara Vucic. HUANG JINGWEN / XINHUA



XI'S VISIT

Serbian steelworks going strong

Chinese manufacturer injects vigor into plant on the verge of collapse

By ZHANG YUNBI in Beijing and ZHANG YU in Shijiazhuang

At the confluence of the Danube and Morava rivers lies the Serbian city of Smederevo and the 111-year-old Smederevo steelworks, the pride of Serbia's steel industry.

In April of 2016, Chinese steel manufacturer HBIS Group acquired the plant, which was on the verge of collapse. Two months later on June 19, President Xi Jinping visited the factory during his state visit to Serbia and met local workers face-to-face.

Vladan Mihailovic, chief operating officer of the steelworks, remembered that Xi said the plant would surely be revitalized and play a positive role in increasing local employment, improving people's living standards and advancing Serbia's economic development.

"The workers gave a warm applause to President Xi's words," he recalled.

With efforts from both sides, the factory gradually emerged from its crisis.

These days, the factory, known as HBIS Smederevo Steel Plant, has become a flagship project of Belt and Road cooperation between the countries.

On April 29, the Chinese president wrote a reply to a letter sent by 30 representatives of Serbian workers at the plant, once again drawing public attention to the factory.

In his reply, Xi said he was very happy that the plant had quickly turned from loss to profit following the investment by the Chinese enterprise, and that more than 5,000 workers have had their jobs secured and that thousands of families are enjoying a peaceful and happy life.

"I hope you will continue to do your own jobs wholeheartedly and dedicate yourself enthusiastically to the operation and development of the plant, so as to make new and greater contributions to the socioeconomic development of Serbia and the consolidation of the ironclad China-Serbia friendship," Xi said.

Mihailovic, the chief operating officer, said, "Currently, the production and operation status and technical indicators of the plant are in the best shape since its establishment."

A series of pertinent measures taken by the Chinese management team have given the plant a fresh look.

The Chinese side led the transformation and upgrades of the plant's original equipment, sending 20 technical and management teams and over 260 experts from China to carry out assessments and implement more than 120 technical upgrade projects.

"The changes we've made to this plant have been aimed to empower

it, to make it develop in a sustainable way and to revitalize it, which is not a short-term, short-sighted approach," said Yu Yong, chairman of HBIS Group.

In the past eight years, the market for the plant's products has expanded from Central and Eastern Europe to destinations such as Western Europe, the United States and Latin America.

Since 2016, the plant has realized cumulative export earnings of 4.77 billion euros (\$5.1 billion), making it Serbia's top exporter for a number of years.

Last year, the steelworks contributed 795 million euros to the city of Smederevo's annual production output, and accounting for 1.15 percent of Serbia's annual GDP.

During the acquisition by the Chinese company eight years ago, the plant had to put at ease the minds of the plant's more than 5,000 Serbian employees, who were waiting anxiously to see whether there would be layoffs.

Eight years later, Ivan Matkovic,

head of operations for rolling and coil storage, recalled in excitement the pledge made at that time by the Chinese management team: "Not a single existing employee of the plant should be left behind!"

The 5,000 employees have remained at the plant, and most of its executives and department heads have been local.

Matkovic is a third-generation employee at the plant, with his grandfather and father having worked there.

He is a living witness to the prominent changes in the working environment over the past eight years.

With the renovation and introduction of intelligent equipment, the employees are able to control and monitor production via computers with the click of a mouse.

"I have two sons and a daughter, and I hope they will come here to work in the future," he said.

Contact the writers at zhangyunbi@chinadaily.com.cn

FIRST PERSON

National anthem heard while overseas

Zhu Jingyi, a postgraduate student at the School of Journalism and Communication, Tsinghua University.



In April, I embarked on a journey to Serbia as part of a field trip with nine schoolmates and two professors from Tsinghua University. Throughout our trip, we were embraced by the warmth and friendliness of Serbian people, who surprised us with their deep appreciation for Chinese culture.

When strolling through Kalemegdan Citadel, where the spring colors peeked out from lush green leaves lining the road, we encountered a street artist immersed in his music with the wooden stringed instrument called a tambura.

As we hurried past, his tune suddenly shifted, blending unfamiliar Serbian lyrics with a familiar melody that left us in awe when we were in a foreign land — it was *March of the Volunteers*, China's national anthem.

The elderly artist who played *March of the Volunteers* was Josip Komljenovic. He warmly called us "Chinese brothers" in Serbian and invited us to stay for a moment to share his passion for music.

"I play 28 instruments," he said enthusiastically and took out various traditional Serbian musical instruments from his bag and showed them to us. "I hope to go to China one day to give my own recital."

Upon our leaving, he pulled out a copy of *The Sun Shines Over the Sava River* and presented it as a gift to us. Then, he skillfully played the tambura and sang a well-known Serbian folk song called *Tamo Daleko* (In That Distant Place) for us as a final farewell.

This song was performed by Serbian singer Slobodan Tegula during China Central Television's Spring Festival Gala in 2023 as part of the performance *Song of Flowers Along the Belt and Road*. On that night of jubilation, Tegula was seen by the audience sitting atop the Kalemegdan Citadel, with the statue of Pobednik (The Victor) standing behind him. The statue was erected in 1928 to commemorate Serbia's victories in the Balkan Wars and World War I. With one hand holding a bird symbolizing peace and the other gripping a sword symbolizing power and conquest, Pobednik guarded that rare moment of tranquility in the surging currents of history.

As we basked in the warmth of this musical exchange, our interactions with the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade solidified our belief in the depth of China-Serbia friendship. The young researchers and assistants at the institute painted a vivid picture of their perception of China, using keywords such as "friend", "civilization", "history", "tradition", "cooperation" and "industry".

When we showed them a video about Tsinghua University, we were surprised that one research fellow could fluently read the Chinese subtitles in it.

"The popularity of both the Chinese language and Chinese people in Serbia is really beyond my imagination. The infrastructure projects here with Chinese investment are highly appreciated by the Serbian people and that's why they greet East Asian faces with 'ni hao' (hello) when encountering them on the streets," said Zhou Xinyi, a member of the field trip team.

Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China has invested in many important bridges and railways in Serbia that helped connect the country with neighboring countries and improve people's well-being.

"Despite differences between European and Chinese companies in terms of operation and management, Chinese companies have adapted well to the local regulations in Serbia and achieved a high level of localization," said Nenad Stekic, a researcher with the institute who has the Chinese name "Xi Ningyi".

Zhu Jingyi talked with Mo Jingzi.

High-speed rail improves travel, economy in Balkans

By LUO WANGSHU

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The railway linking the Serbian capital Belgrade and the Hungarian capital Budapest dates back to 1883, when the Orient Express traveled between Paris and what is now known as Istanbul at an average speed of about 40 kilometers per hour.

More than 140 years later, a 342-km high-speed railway linking the capitals will travel at a top speed of 200 km/h and upon completion will shorten the trip to three hours from the current eight.

In Serbia, the 80-km Belgrade- Novi Sad section of the railway began operation on March 19, 2022, and has facilitated the movement of people and even brought a new commuter lifestyle.

More than 7 million passenger trips have been made, according to China Railway International.

An average of 62 passenger trains operate every day, with peak daily passenger volume reaching 15,059.

"The safe, efficient, convenient and comfortable high-speed railway has created a better travel experience for passengers, and has been widely favored by people along the line. The volume of passenger trips has continued to increase significantly, with the train occupancy rate remaining at a relatively high level," the company said.

"As the line shortens travel time between the two cities, more and more people are embarking on a new commuter lifestyle as they travel between the two cities," it said.

The railway facilitates the movement of people, cargo, capital and information, driving the development of commercial and tourism industries.

The number of passengers traveling to historical and cultural attrac-



Passengers get off a train that departed from Belgrade at the Novi Sad railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia, on April 29. LI YING / XINHUA

tions along the line is increasing, creating a large number of job opportunities, bringing development opportunities to more enterprises and greatly promoting socioeconomic growth in the region, according to the company.

Twenty-seven-year-old Aleksandra Radovanovic lives in Belgrade and works in Novi Sad. The operation of the Belgrade- Novi Sad railway section has shortened her commute from 90 minutes to about 30.

Serbian engineer Milan Banovic, an engineer with the Hungary-Serbia Railway, now commutes to work every day on this line.

"It has brought revolutionary changes. With the high-speed railway operating at 200 km/h, the difference compared to the past is incomparable. People are satisfied, the train's occupancy rates are high, and the passenger volume continues to increase," Banovic said.

Marko Jeremic, an engineer at Serbian Railways, said the ticket prices are affordable.

He said that collaboration with China Railway International on the high-speed line made it possible for Serbia to be the railway leader in the western Balkans.

"In that way, we became the leader because no other neighboring

countries — Croatia, Hungary and Bulgaria — have high-speed lines over 160 kilometers per hour," he said.

The 108-km remaining leg of the line in Serbia — between Novi Sad and Subotica — completed track-laying work last month, a step in preparation for the line's operation in Serbia by the end of this year.

The 342-km Serbia-Hungary Railway is an important Belt and Road Initiative project in Europe. Upon completion, the Serbian section of the railway will total 183 km, with a designed top speed of 200 km/h. The Hungarian section will be 159 km and have a top

speed of 160 km/h.

The Serbian section is expected to be operational by the end of this year. The Hungarian section is under construction. Upon completion, travel time between Belgrade and Budapest will be reduced from eight hours to about three.

The railway is the flagship cooperation project between China and Central and Eastern European countries, and the first project to align China's railway technology and equipment with the European Union's technical specifications for railway connectivity.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

Higher education institutes deepen transnational cooperation

By ZHAO YIMENG

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Higher education institutes in China and Serbia have deepened cooperation in multiple disciplines in the past year, especially in oral medicine, physical education and the arts.

Since the Serbian Universities Co-office China was established in April last year, it has been the bridge between China and Serbia in higher education exchanges, helping students from both countries have a deeper understanding of each other, said director Wu Zhenzhong.

Though cooperation in the education sector seems not as close as other fields such as the economy and tourism, there's a great demand by universities from both sides for academic and talent exchanges, Wu said.

This month, equipment for dental digital simulation training developed by Beihang University will be donated to the University



A teacher explains how to play a guzheng at the China Cultural Center in Belgrade, Serbia, April 29. LI JING / XINHUA

of Belgrade's School of Dental Medicine.

Developed by the State Key Laboratory of Virtual Reality Technology and Systems, the surgery simulator is mainly utilized for basic curriculum teaching, as well as the training and assessment of surgical train-

ing, according to the lab.

"Oral medicine in Serbia holds the leading position in Europe, and our virtual reality technology and equipment will be helpful in training their top dentists," Wu said, adding that the system can help students identify operational defi-

ciencies in a timely manner and improve their skills.

Like a VR game, students are expected to get real-time feedback including the accurate differentiation of skin, tongue and tooth stiffness by using the equipment.

In addition, the University of Belgrade and Beijing Sport University are planning to establish a tennis school and promote training programs for teenagers, Wu said.

With strong performances in sports such as football, basketball and volleyball, as well as iconic tennis star Novak Djokovic, Serbia has rich experience in physical education and sports training.

Beijing Sport University plans to send students to study master's and PhD programs at the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education at the University of Belgrade, while recruiting basketball and volleyball coaches from the faculty, Wu said.

In addition, Shandong University and the University of Novi Sad initiated the Academic Network for Sports of CCEIC (China-

CCEIC Higher Education Institutions Consortium) in November, aiming to promote the development of sports science between higher education institutions in China and Central and Eastern Europe countries.

So far, 10 universities from Central and Eastern European countries and 21 Chinese universities have applied to join the network, according to Shandong University.

This year, the first student basketball competition among CCEIC member countries will be held in Shandong as an event for sports and cultural exchange, it said.

Wu, director of the office, said the number of Chinese students expected to study in Serbia is increasing, especially after English-taught programs from undergraduate to doctoral degrees were launched in the past year.

Meanwhile, the office has been optimizing the international student visa and degree certification process to facilitate the two-way flow of talent, he said.

XI'S VISIT

VISITS OF VISION

President's visit a boost for China-Hungary ties

Budapest has seen growing interest in learning Mandarin as nations deepen bilateral relations

By CHEN WEIHUA
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Erdelyi Zsuzsanna, principal of the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School in Budapest, said she was so excited to learn about Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Hungary.

Xi visited the school in October 2009 when he was Chinese vice-president. In early 2023, Xi replied to a letter from students of the school.

"The timing (of this visit) is so important because this year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of China-Hungary diplomatic relations, as well as the 20th anniversary of our school," said Erdelyi, who joined the school in 2004 when the school was founded. She became its principal in 2009.

She said the whole country is excited about Xi's visit and she believes the state visit will elevate the friendly relations between the two countries.

"The relations between Hungary and China have become better every day and the Hungarian media have news relating to China almost every day," she said, citing news about new Chinese investment and exhibitions.

"Hungarians can be immersed in Chinese culture without even leaving home."

Erdelyi received Xi at the school during his 2009 visit. She said the visit left a deep impression on her.

"At that time Xi had encouraged our students to become friendship envoys between China and Hungary," she said, adding that Xi's words had been a great encouragement for the school's faculty.

Before the Spring Festival of 2023, two 12th-grade students from the bilingual school, Varga Bonita (Chinese name Hu Lingyue) and Imre Tamara (Chinese name Song Zhixiao), in a letter to Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan, sent their Chinese New Year greetings on behalf of all students of the school.

In the letter, the two girls recounted their experience of studying Chinese in the school for 12 years and expressed their desire to study in Chinese universities and contribute to the friendship between Hungary and China.

Both of them are freshmen at the Capital Normal University in Beijing, studying how to teach Chinese to international students under a full scholarship.

A few days later, Xi replied to their letter, in which he said he still remembered having a chat with the school's teachers and students during his 2009 visit.

Xi said he wanted to give the students a thumbs-up for their efforts in learning the Chinese language and for their contributions to the China-Hungary friendship.

He said both China and Hungary have a long history and a rich culture, and the people of both countries enjoy traditional friendship and close cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

Xi said the students are welcome to study at Chinese universities after graduation from high school.

Xi hopes more Hungarian youths would love and study the Chinese language, have an opportunity to travel around China to learn more about the country and its history and culture, and strive to become envoys to develop the China-Hungary friendship.

"Imre and I decided to write to Grandpa Xi to express our gratitude and convey our Spring Festival greetings," Varga told the media after receiving Xi's reply.

The two students won the Chinese Ambassador Scholarship in January last year.

"Our dream is to be a translator. This letter will encourage us to continue working hard to study Chinese and become an excellent translator," Varga said.

Erdelyi, the principal, told China Daily that both students and teachers were overjoyed upon receiving President Xi's letter.

She said no one expected Xi to



1: Students at the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School attend the Youth Chinese Test in Budapest. Hungarians are developing a greater interest in learning the Chinese language as the two countries deepen their ties. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

2: Hungarian students Ferenczi Samuel (left) and Sipos Bendeguz will study in China this year. They both have received scholarships from a Chinese company.

CHEN WEIHUA / CHINA DAILY

3: A Chinese teacher instructs students on Chinese calligraphy at the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School in Budapest on Feb 24 last year. LIAN YI / XINHUA

4: Students practice martial arts at the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School in Budapest on Feb 24 last year. LIAN YI / XINHUA



"Hungarians can be immersed in Chinese culture without even leaving home."

Erdelyi Zsuzsanna, principal of the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School

reply so soon since he has such a busy schedule.

"It's such a great encouragement," she said.

"It shows President Xi's care for the school and the importance he attaches to the Hungary-China ties."

Fostering enthusiasm

Erdelyi said Xi's reply had boosted the enthusiasm of students to learn the Chinese language and its culture.

Xi's letter was officially presented at the school on Feb 24, 2023, by Yang Chao, then-charge d'affaires of the Chinese embassy in Hungary.

Adam Stifter, deputy state secretary for the development of eastern relations at Hungary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, attended the event.

He described it as one of the best examples of cultural and educational cooperation between Hungary and China.

He said that by learning the history and culture of the Chinese lan-

guage, the students' knowledge will be enriched, contributing to the development of relations between the two countries.

Xi's letter has been exhibited in a meeting room of the bilingual school, while a group photo of Xi with the students during his 2009 visit hangs on a wall in the school's hallway.

It is the only full-time school in central and eastern Europe where students are taught in Chinese and the local language. Unlike other schools, students at the bilingual school are required to study three languages — Hungarian, Chinese and English.

"With their language advantage, our students can become better education and culture envoys," Erdelyi said, adding that learning Chinese means the students can help develop Chinese-Hungarian friendship.

She admitted learning Chinese was difficult for many students, especially writing the Chinese characters. If they persevere, they can master the language, she said.

"It will take time, patience and perseverance," she said.

"If they can master such a difficult language, then there is no other language they cannot master."

Erdelyi believes the increase in the number of Chinese investors in Hungary will provide her students with job opportunities since many Chinese-funded companies want to hire professionals who are familiar with the language.

"Our school is likely to become a 'reserve force' for those Chinese companies," she said.

Chen Yue, head of iFlytek Europe, a leading AI company in China, echoed her views.

The company has donated iFlytek dictionary pens to the school to help the students and is also providing full scholarships to students to study at the Anhui Institute of Information Technology based in Wuhu, Anhui province.

the artificial intelligence sector in China and Hungary", he said.

"We also want to contribute to the friendship between Chinese and Hungarian people and to promote people-to-people exchanges," he said, adding that the bilingual school is a good choice for the company's full scholarship program.

Ferenczi Samuel, a 12th grader who has been granted iFlytek's full scholarship to study at the Anhui college, said he was excited to study in China.

Great opportunity

"It's a great opportunity," he said in Chinese. He said Chinese and Hungarian are among the most difficult languages to learn.

He plans to study AI at the Anhui school, saying he has always liked mathematics and computer science. And he knows iFlytek offers good jobs in AI.

"If I have China work experience, it will be easier for me to find a job back in Hungary," he said.

Sipos Bendeguz, another iFlytek's full scholarship winner, also plans to pursue studies in AI in China.

"I was always curious about China and its culture. I'm looking forward to studying in China," said Sipos, whose Chinese name is Gu Tianle. He shares his name with Hong Kong's famed actor Louis Koo Tin-Lok.

He admitted he will miss his home, friends and family in Budapest, especially his pets — four cats and a French bulldog.

A total of 10 of the bilingual school's 30 graduates will study in China this year on a full scholarship.

Besides iFlytek, many other companies have offered support. Bank of China Central and Eastern Europe Ltd, based in Budapest, has been making donations to the bilingual school for many years to help build its language lab, provide sports facilities, conduct Chinese language summer camps and reward students and teachers for excellence.

Chinese Ambassador to Hungary Gong Tao, who took up his role in September, has already visited the school three times, including granting the Chinese Ambassador Scholarship.

He invited Varga and Imre to the embassy early this year when they returned from China to visit their families during the school's winter vacation.

"I firmly believe that these youngsters who study Chinese will be the main force promoting China-Hungary friendship," Gong said.

Wang Yue is the representative of the Capital Normal University, the Chinese partner of the Confucius Classroom at the bilingual school. She said the cooperation between the Capital Normal University and the bilingual school is "very good".

The Confucius Classroom was officially inaugurated in 2017 as a partnership between the Capital Normal University and the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School.

"The students are quite interested in learning the Chinese language," said Wang, also a Chinese language teacher and a fluent Hungarian speaker who interpreted for China Daily during the interview with Erdelyi, who spoke Hungarian.

The school, where Chinese language class is mandatory, only had 87 students when it was founded in 2004. Now, it boasts 530 students and two-thirds of them are Hungarians.

"This shows the growing interest in learning Chinese," she said.

"The increasing numbers of Chinese language learners in Hungary and Hungarian students studying in China reflect the growing interest and appreciation for each other's culture and traditions," said Csizmadia Norbert, external director of Bank of China Central and Eastern Europe Ltd.

Erdelyi has visited China several times since her first visit in 2007, just a year before the Beijing Olympics.

"The city was changing every day and the construction of sports facilities was in full swing. And I felt how Chinese were looking forward to the sports extravaganza," she said.

She also visited many other Chinese cities.

"China is such a populous country compared to Hungary. But whichever city I visited, I saw the dedication to preserving its own traditional culture and history," Erdelyi said.

XI'S VISIT

China-Hungary relations at their highest point

Investment, political, cultural exchanges testimony to accelerating bilateral ties

By CHEN WEIHUA
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Relations between China and Hungary are at their highest point ever, according to Hungarian and Chinese experts, who said they hope the upcoming state visit by President Xi Jinping to Hungary will help further boost ties.

Levente Horvath, director of the Budapest-based Eurasia Center, said bilateral cooperation in economic, political and cultural areas has reached its highest point in the 75 years of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

He said Hungary's Eastern Opening policy launched 14 years ago and China's Belt and Road Initiative are a perfect match.

"The cooperation between China and Hungary has become ever closer," Horvath, a former Hungarian consul-general in Shanghai, told China Daily in fluent Chinese.

He cited the fast-growing bilateral trade and the fact that China is the largest investor in Hungary as testimony to the good relationship.

"It's a great time for President Xi to visit Hungary to celebrate the 75th anniversary with our President (Tamas Sulyok) and Prime Minister (Viktor Orban)," Horvath said.

"We hope this visit will help further accelerate the development of the bilateral relations."

Csizmadia Norbert, external director of Bank of China Central and Eastern Europe Ltd, stressed that cultural and educational exchanges have played a crucial role in enhancing mutual understanding and people-to-people bonds between the two countries.

"The increasing number of Chinese language learners in Hungary and Hungarian students studying in China reflects the growing interest and appreciation for each other's cultures and traditions," he said.

He pointed out that cooperation in the fields of science, technology and innovation has seen significant progress, with joint research projects and academic exchanges contributing to advancements in various sectors.

"Looking ahead, there are promising opportunities for further

deepening and diversifying the cooperation between China and Hungary," Csizmadia said.

"Both countries can explore new areas of collaboration such as green technology, healthcare, tourism and digital economy."

He also believes strengthening connectivity through initiatives like the BRI can create additional momentum for bilateral cooperation.

"The China-Hungary relationship has been developing at a very high level, and bilateral cooperation has been very fruitful," said Ding Chun, director of the Center for European Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai.

Ding noted that Hungary has been one of China's major economic and trade partners in Central and Eastern Europe and an important Belt and Road country.

"The state visit to Hungary by President Xi will further boost the political mutual trust and break new ground for BRI cooperation," he said.

He believes Hungary's six-month rotating presidency on the Council of the European Union starting on July 1 will also help contribute to a steady development of China-EU relations.

Imre Hamar, vice-rector for international affairs at Eotvos Lorand University, said the China-Hungary relationship is probably at its best in history.

"Our government warmly welcomes cooperation with China in various fields," Hamar, a sinologist, told China Daily in Chinese.

"Our government hopes Hungary will become a hub for Chinese investors," he said, citing a list of Chinese investors in Hungary, from electric car maker BYD to battery maker CATL.

He noted the increasing number of Chinese investors have been good news for his students studying Chinese. Many of his students pursuing master's degrees work for Chinese companies during the day and go to school after work.

Hamar said he has been invited by Prime Minister Orban to attend the welcoming banquet for President Xi.

"It would be a great honor if I get to toast President Xi or chat a few words. That would be the happiest thing for me," he said.



A customer shops at an experience center dedicated to Chinese goods at the Central European Trade and Logistics Cooperation Zone in Budapest, Hungary, on April 29. ZHANG FAN / XINHUA

Trade opportunities grow under BRI

By WANG KEJU
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The Belt and Road Initiative has presented massive trade and investment opportunities for European countries such as Hungary and Serbia, helping them develop into important regional players from once being on the periphery of Europe, experts said.

Hungary was the first European country to sign a BRI cooperation agreement with China, which has provided opportunities for the country's infrastructure development and made significant contributions to improving China-Hungary economic and financial ties.

The bilateral trade between the two countries has witnessed remarkable growth in recent years. Last year, their total trade volume exceeded \$13 billion, according to data from Hungary.

Moreover, Hungary, among all Central and Eastern European countries, receives the most foreign investment from China. Its direct investment in Hungary reached 7.6 billion euros (\$8.2 billion) last year, accounting for 58 percent of the total foreign direct investment in the country.

These investments have helped create more than 10,000 job opportunities in Hungary.

In particular, Chinese investment has played a pivotal role in solidifying Hungary's position as a key player in the European automotive market, said Bai Ming, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation.

The automotive manufacturing industry, along with its entire supply chain, holds a significant position in Hungary's economy. Chinese companies have recognized the potential of Hungary as a hub for automotive production and have made substantial investments in establishing pro-



A freight train carrying 110 containers of household appliances and mechanical equipment departs from Jinhua, Zhejiang province, on its way to Budapest, Hungary, on April 1. HU XIAOFEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

duction facilities and research and development centers, Bai said.

The enhanced cooperation has not only brought financial support but also advanced technology and expertise to Hungary's automotive industry, he added.

Chinese automotive company BYD has announced its plans to establish a new energy passenger vehicle production base in the southern Hungarian city of Szeged, which would bring to the country thousands of new jobs and the latest technology in the industry of the future, the company said in a statement in December.

The economic relationship between Europe and China is characterized by close ties and mutual benefits, and the significant development in Asia, particularly in China, presents opportunities rather than threats, said Xu Hongcai, deputy director of the China Association of Policy Science's Economic Policy Committee. Calls for "decoupling" and "de-risking" are seen as contrary to European interests, he added.

The Hungary-Serbia railway, as part of the BRI program, serves as

another example of sound China-EU cooperation that has delivered tangible benefits to Europe and beyond.

The railway, stretching from the Serbian capital of Belgrade to the Hungarian capital of Budapest, covering a total distance of 341.7 kilometers, has been designed to achieve a maximum speed of 200 km per hour.

The section between Belgrade and Novi Sad, Serbia's second-largest city, opened in March 2022, drastically reducing the travel time between the two cities from 90 minutes to just 36 minutes. As of March, the section has handled over 6.83 million passenger trips.

Meanwhile, China and Serbia signed a free trade agreement in October to boost bilateral trade and business ties. The FTA is the first such agreement China has inked with a Central or Eastern European country.

The bilateral trade between China and Serbia has witnessed remarkable growth, with the trade volume skyrocketing from \$596 million in 2016 to \$4.35 billion last year, according to statistics from China's General Administration of Customs.

Agricultural cooperation producing fruitful yields

By LI LEI
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With both countries having shown resilience in food supply despite the upward trend in global hunger over the past decade, China and Hungary have stepped up agricultural research ties and food trade investment.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

On Jan 24, Ma Youxiang, a vice-minister of agriculture and rural affairs, met Minister of Agriculture of Hungary Istvan Nagy in Budapest, the Hungarian capital.

They agreed to further deepen collaboration in agriculture through the China-Hungary Agricultural Science and Technology Cooperation Center, which was inaugurated in Hohhot in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region in 2012.

According to a news release published by Ma's administration, the Chinese vice-minister said he hoped the two sides could strengthen exchanges of germ plasm of farm animals and food crops — the genetic resources accounting for desirable traits such as higher meat output and drought resistance — through the center, and work together on farm produce deep-processing technologies.

The vice-minister said China is seeking to work with Hungary on bee farming and is willing to create more platforms to facilitate investment and exchanges at the corporate level.

"Bilateral agricultural cooperation has provided impetus for improving China-Hungary relations," Ma said.

The release said Nagy spoke highly of food-related cooperation between the two countries and expressed a wish to deepen the ties for more "practical results".

The decision to create the center was agreed upon at a meeting in 2011, when the then-vice-minister of agriculture Niu Dun met with a delegation from Hungary in Beijing.

Both sides agreed to facilitate scientist exchanges and conduct various forms of personnel training through the center.

The center is tasked with the introduction and exchange of high-quality local resources of crops and poultry; research on breeding high-quality stress-resistant varieties and cultivation techniques; and research on biological control, microbiology, agricultural information technology, and environmentally friendly plant protection technologies.

Hungary's agricultural area covers about 57 percent of its land mass.

Once a traditional agrarian country, Hungary joined the European Union two decades ago, providing a boon to modernize its agriculture.

Currently, the proportion of agriculture that contributes to the country's GDP has decreased to around 3 to 4 percent, according to government data.

Hungary's agriculture has demonstrated resilience in the face of the disruptions induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with its current grain output being enough to feed over 20 million people — twice its population.

The agricultural exchange forms part of a broader initiative between the two nations to enhance innovation cooperation, a move deemed mutually advantageous by experts.

Eszteella Fazekas, a Budapest-based expert at the Chinese-Hungarian Technology Transfer Center, said in a research paper in 2020 that China's investments in domestic innovation, capacity and capability position it favorably to surpass the United States and Europe in the medium to long term.

"Diversifying Hungary's partner base in research, development and innovation, strengthening ties with China, while maintaining EU relations will allow Hungary to remain competitive, access the newest technology trends, elevate the country's negotiating power and revitalize its industries," she concluded.

Shenzhen EV players head to Europe

By LI MENGHAN in Beijing and
WANG XU in Shenzhen, Guangdong

Electric vehicle companies from Shenzhen in South China's Guangdong province have gradually taken root in Hungary, bolstering local economic growth and promoting the green transition.

"Companies in the battery industrial chain in Shenzhen, including BYD Group, Shenzhen Kedali Industry, Sunwoda Electronic and GEM have successively invested and cooperated in Hungary, taking root where the traditional automotive manufacturing industry is a key economic pillar," said Chen Shou, president of the Shenzhen Battery Industry Association.

"This has significantly facilitated the restructuring of Hungary's economic ecosystem."

Being one of the first countries to join the Belt and Road Initiative, Hungary boasts strong ties with China. This, along with the country's robust foundation in automotive manufacturing, and the receptive stance toward sustainable practices, has set the stage for enhanced collaboration between the two nations.

In Hungary, the automotive manufacturing industry accounts for around one-third of manufacturing output. Nearly 90 percent of the industry's production is for export, making up one-fifth of

Hungary's national export value. The vehicles are mainly sold to European Union member states, especially Germany, according to China Automotive News.

In recent years, the Hungarian government has hastened the implementation of an electric vehicle development plan, which was proposed in 2016, in response to the growing awareness of the imperative to address climate change and the EU's ban on new sales of carbon-emitting petrol and diesel cars by 2035.

The government recently announced a 90-billion forint (\$248.4 million) electric vehicle support program. This involves providing subsidies for local businesses to purchase electric vehicles and establishing charging stations along the national highway network.

"Hungary hopes to become an important partner for China in the realm of green transformation, especially in the field of new energy vehicles," Gladden Pappin, president of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, told People's Daily.

CATL, a leading global supplier of electric vehicle batteries and a strategic partner of Shenzhen city, is building a 100-gigawatt-hour battery plant in Debrecen in eastern Hungary. It will be CATL's second battery plant in Europe, following a

facility in Germany. The construction of the plant is expected to take two years, and there are plans for it to supply batteries to some 30 electric vehicle brands such as BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Volkswagen.

Noemi Sidlo, a spokesperson for CATL in Hungary, said: "While providing the best-in-class battery products to our customers, which will accelerate the transition to e-mobility in Hungary and Europe, the investment will generate substantial tax revenues, create new jobs and become a new driver for local economy."

"What's more, CATL's investment will also help attract both upstream and downstream partners across the electric vehicle value chain to Hungary, thus injecting constant vitality into the country's sustainable development."

China's new-energy vehicle giant BYD also chose Hungary for its inaugural entry into the passenger car market in Central and Eastern Europe. It's the first site in Europe for a Chinese electric vehicle manufacturing facility.

"The facility will be located in the northern part of Szeged, a city in southern Hungary, and is expected to start production by the end of 2025," said Li Wei, vice-president of BYD. The facility, spanning 3 square kilometers, is expected to produce 200,000 cars annually.

"As the Belt and Road Initiative



A chassis manufactured by Chinese new energy vehicle producer BYD is displayed at a dealership in Budapest, Hungary, in October. BYD opened two showrooms in the Hungarian capital on Oct 19, marking its entrance into the country's market of passenger vehicles. ATTILA VOLGYI / XINHUA

progresses, economic ties between China and Hungary are strengthening," Li said. "BYD will bring advanced technology and automated production lines to Hungary, helping the local automotive industry transition toward electric and smart vehicles, and driving forward sustainable development efforts."

She added the initiative is crucial for the company to enter the global market and expand its presence worldwide.

In April, several battery companies such as Shenzhen Hello Tech Energy and Baoming Technology, reached cooperation agreements during a visit to Hungary, the

Shenzhen Battery Industry Association said.

"As China's electric vehicles, power batteries and associated industries come to Hungary and other countries participating in the BRI, a surge in local demand is anticipated. This will involve requirements for technologies such as battery recycling and industrial support," said Chen from the association.

He expressed China's readiness to aid the elevation of technological standards and offer vocational education in Hungary.

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CHINA



Clockwise from above left: The interactive show *Shear Madness Salon* by Mahua Fun Age is a comedy hit staged at Ruihong Tiandi Hall of the Moon shopping mall in Shanghai. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Performers rehearse at Lu Theater in Chengdu, Sichuan province. LYU GUOYING / FOR CHINA DAILY A passerby takes a photo of Mahua Fun Age show posters at a shopping mall in Shanghai. WANG GANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Theaters: Evolving to offer new experiences

From page 1

On Dec 24, 2019, the company launched its first performance at Taikoo Li Sanlitun, a shopping complex in downtown Beijing.

The concert featured cello player Zhao Xuyang and pianist Liu Yuntian performing Beethoven's complete cello sonatas. Ticket prices ranged from 100 to 380 yuan (\$14 to \$53), and to Song's surprise the concert sold out.

In 2022, the company opened its second performance space in the commercial area of Land Port City in Changying, eastern Beijing.

The average capacity at the two performance spaces, each having four theaters, is around 200 seats. Live performances are staged almost every week from Friday to Sunday.

The company has diversified its musical programs to also cater to patrons who have never attended a classical music performance.

Concerts have featured musical works adapted from popular movie soundtracks, such as compositions by Japanese composer Joe Hisaishi for the anime director Hayao Miyazaki.

On Saturday, a new performance space will be launched at the Wukesong Wanda Plaza, after months of trial runs. Song said the venue is much bigger than the other two, with a capacity of 500 seats. Dramas, musicals and classical music concerts will be staged there.

The two performance spaces in Sanlitun and Changying have also staged dramas and contemporary music shows such as pop and rock to appeal to broader audiences.

"When people go to shopping malls to enjoy a live performance, they expect to have an experience beyond what they can get from traditional theaters," said Wen Juan, general manager of productions and theater at Mahua Fun Age, a leading Chinese comedy production company.

"At the same time, shopping malls have become more than just places to shop — they're a lifestyle."

The company, known as Kaixin Mahua in Chinese, was founded in 2003 and soon gained a large fan base with its popular theater productions of comedies such as *Goodbye Mr Loser* and *The Count of Wulong Mountain*.

Mahua Fun Age has never stopped exploring new business opportunities, Wen said.

In August 2020, it opened its first performance venue in a commercial building at Shanghai Nanxiang Incity Mega, the city's largest single-structure shopping mall located in Jiading district.

So far, the company has opened more than 40 performance venues in commercial areas at home and abroad, and staged performances in over 120 Chinese cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Shenzhen, Guangdong province, and Chengdu, Sichuan province.

Access all areas

Wen said the company's goal is to build a chain of theaters that will allow people to have a theater experience that is as simple as going to the movies.

Some of the Mahua Fun Age shopping mall theaters stage up to eight shows a week.



Left: Star Theaters, located at the Eastern Suburb Memory park in Chengdu, has opened three theaters in the cultural park. LYU GUOYING / FOR CHINA DAILY **Right:** A cabaret musical *Modern Dream Star* is staged in August at Music Fans Art Space in Beijing. LI NA / FOR CHINA DAILY



We want to live in the moment and to have some fun. Going to theaters, just like going to the cinema and to the gym, helps us relieve some pressure from our daily lives and work."

Pan Peng, gallery assistant

"The majority of audiences that go to watch shows at our theaters inside shopping malls go by chance. They see our posters and buy tickets at the door without any plans," she said.

"It helps us expand our fan base and also presents new challenges that we haven't encountered at traditional theaters."

When the company puts on a show at a theater, its only focus is the theatrical productions.

At shopping malls, they try to offer audiences a full experience that ranges from the venue's interior design to services such as food and beverages.

"At the malls, they want something interactive and immersive, much more than what they get at traditional theaters," Wen said.

"For example, audiences are invited to play roles onstage along with our actors and actresses. We also provide them with activities before and after the shows, warming them up and extending their theater experience."

One of the company's hit interactive shows is *Shear Madness Salon*, a Chinese stage adaptation of the German whodunit by Paul Portner.

In 2021, Mahua Fun Age premiered the comedy at Ruihong Tiandi Hall of the Moon shopping mall in Shanghai's Hongkou district. The play has also been staged in other Chinese cities including Tianjin and Changsha, Hunan province.

Another popular show is *Kaixin Liaozhai*, or *The Crazy Happy Version of Liaozhai — Three Lifetimes*, inspired by Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) writer Pu Songling. The comedy combines a classic supernatural tale with contemporary elements, such as rap and everyday life, and is a favorite with young fans.

Unlike a traditional theater experience, which is often serious and formal, the company offers patrons food and beverages during the show.

"People just want to get out there, watch a comedy, and laugh together,"

Wen said. "When people go to new places, they look for new experiences. Theater is no longer just a place to stage shows, and the relationship between performers and audiences has also changed."

Shopping malls and commercial complexes, which face challenges from online retailers, also need to renovate their spaces to meet the evolving demands of shoppers, Wen said.

Accidental fans

Pan Peng, a 23-year-old gallery assistant in Beijing, said she and her friends enjoyed a Mahua Fun Age comedy in Beijing's Chaoyang Joy City shopping mall in January.

She said after hanging out and eating dinner, the group saw a poster for the show on the eighth floor of the mall and bought tickets not knowing what to expect.

"The atmosphere was great with performers and audiences interacting frequently," said Pan, who has watched plays by established theater companies such as Beijing People's Art Theatre. "It was quite different from the shows I've seen before."

She said her generation, born after 2000, has increasingly become the "main force of consumption" in the country.

"We want to live in the moment and to have some fun. Going to theaters, just like going to the cinema and to the gym, helps us relieve some pressure from our daily lives and work," she said.

Wen said the company's research showed the average age of the theater audiences is under 35 years. If a star performs in a show, the average audience age can fall below 18.

"These young people want a sense of community. They want to bridge the gap between everyday social media and meeting and shopping in person," she said.

Smaller is better

The total number of live performances staged in the country from Jan 1 to March 31 was about 119,000, a 72 percent year-on-year increase for the quarter, according to a report by the China Association of Performing Arts.

Ticket revenue for the performing arts sector in the quarter was 10.8 billion yuan, while the number of people watching live performances was over 38 million.

"Small theaters have become a rising force in the performing arts market, attracting a large number of consumers," the report said.

Many Chinese cities, from big metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai to smaller new first-tier cities such as Chengdu, Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, and Changsha, Hunan province, are embracing the phenomenon of small theaters, it added.

Star Theaters was one of the first production companies to realize the value of smaller venues.

More than 10 years ago it opened three auditoriums, each with a capacity of about 200, the first such venues in Beijing, which have attracted drama aficionados who enjoy experimental productions.

The company later expanded its reach to Chengdu, opening three theaters at the Eastern Suburb Memory park, a former TV cathode tube factory in Chengdu converted into a cultural park that is home to fashion stores, restaurants, coffee shops and live venues.

The first theater in the park was opened in September 2019.

Unlike its Beijing counterpart, which is located in a traditional courtyard, each of the theaters in Chengdu has seating capacity for 300 to 500 patrons. Since the theaters were renovated from abandoned factories, the spaces are much bigger and offer an industrial vibe, said Deng Wei, vice-president of Star Theaters.

The Eastern Suburb Memory venues average 80,000 to 10,000 patrons per day on the weekend, with the strong attendance a major motivating factor for the company to open the theaters.

In November last year, Star Theaters premiered in Beijing its latest production, *Miss Julie*, a Chinese stage adaptation of Swedish dramatist August Strindberg's naturalistic play that was first performed in 1889.

With more than 100 sold-out shows since it opened, *Miss Julie* was also staged in Chengdu.

"The local audience gave us warm feedback about the play, even better than the feedback from the Beijing audiences. We also made some adjustments to cater to the local audiences in Chengdu, such as the dialect," said Deng.

"Now, one of our theaters in Chengdu is staging a new play featuring distinctive Sichuan elements, such as Sichuan Opera, combined with elements loved by young people, such as rap music. Our target audience is not only local people but also tourists," Deng added.



A scene from the Chinese comedy *The Crazy Happy Version of Liaozhai — Three Lifetimes*. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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



From left: Veterinarians measure the length of the leopard cat's tail at Shenzhen Wildlife Rescue Center in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, on Oct 31. A vet feeds the leopard cat with goat's milk on Sept 20. Vet Zheng Suqun checks on the health of the leopard cat on Oct 11. PHOTOS BY ZHU HONGBO / NANFANG DAILY



Animal workers take the leopard cat to Wutong Mountain in Shenzhen before its release.

Rescued leopard cat returned to wild habitat

Abandoned cub undergoes 136 days of rehabilitation, wildness training in Shenzhen before being released back to nature

After spending 136 days at the Shenzhen Wildlife Rescue Center, a young leopard cat cub hesitated a moment, sniffing the air outside the door of its portable cage, before running into the woods of Wutong Mountain in Guangdong province on Feb 1.

On Sept 18, the newborn leopard cat, which is under second-class State protection, was found by a park worker in the city who'd noticed it struggling on its own. After a night of observation, waiting in vain for its mother to return, the animal workers from the rescue center decided to take it in.

At about a week old and still not teething, the 17-centimeter-long, 180-gram cub was the tiniest leopard cat rescued by the center.

"The cub was feeble and with low immunity, and we had to put it in an incubator," said Zheng Suqun, a veterinarian at the center. "We fed it goat's milk every two hours."

Some 20 days later, the cub was growing healthily and had been moved out of the incubator, and meat was added to its diet.

On Dec 2, it was transferred to a "wild-

ness cage" where tree branches and vines were positioned to mimic a wild environment. "We tried not to make contact with the cub except for feeding, as we didn't want it to develop any attachment or dependence on humans," Zheng said.

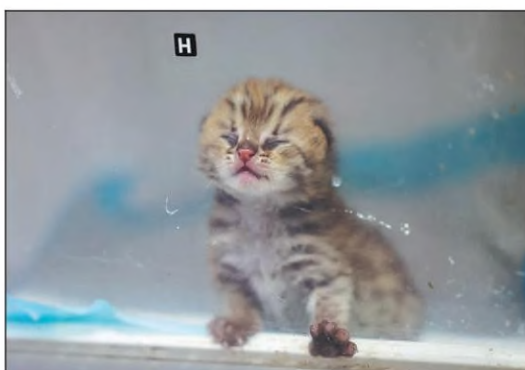
By the end of December, the cub had begun a more comprehensive training period as it began to learn to hunt. "When it was able to prey on small, live animals such as chickens, mice and fish, and could stay vigilant enough to avoid risks, we could call its wildness training a success," said Zeng Zhiliao, a senior vet at the center, who ruled that the leopard cat was meeting the criteria to be released.

Zheng said: "We fed it a little more than usual before the release so that it could get through some time if it is unable to catch food straight away."

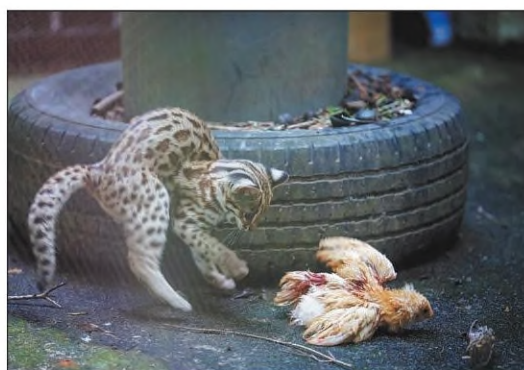
"I'm relieved and relaxed," she said as she watched the leopard cat return to the wild. "We've raised it well and made it able to live, have a habitat and hopefully procreate, and that's nice enough."



At 4 months old, the leopard cat exhibits signs of a stronger physique and vigilance.



From left: The cub, yet to open its eyes, wakes up in its incubator on Sept 20.



The leopard cat learns to hunt a live chicken on Dec 2.



The leopard cat peers into the forest upon its release on Feb 1.

BUSINESS

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HIGHER GROUND

Mood toward
NEV stocks
brightens

Robust sales, trade-in program, future prospects now market-moving factors

By SHI JING in Shanghai and
ZHOU LANXU in Beijing

Listed Chinese new energy vehicle makers can look forward to their stocks performing well in capital market on the back of their robust production and sales numbers, which will be further boosted by the country's supportive policies, market insiders said.

Industry giant BYD sold 313,200 NEVs in April, up 49 percent year-on-year. In all, the company sold 939,500 NEVs in the first four months of the year, up 23 percent year-on-year, it announced on Sunday. Chongqing-based Seres also said on Sunday that it sold 27,868 NEVs in April, up 302.89 percent year-on-year.

Zeeker delivered 16,100 NEVs in April, up 99 percent year-on-year to hit another record high. Nio delivered 15,600 NEVs last month, up 134.6 percent year-on-year.

A car trade-in subsidy program jointly released by China's Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Finance and seven other departments took effect on April 26. A 10,000 yuan (\$1,400) subsidy will be offered to buyers who trade in older cars for new NEVs before the end of the year.

The trade-in plan is expected to spur demand from Chinese car buyers who adopted a wait-and-see stance in the previous months, said Yin Xinchu, chief auto and parts industry analyst at CITIC Securities.

An estimated 14.5 million cars will be eligible for the trade-in program, which might result in the sale of 5.5 million cars by the end of the year. Of the cars that will be eventually traded in, 1 million will be incremental sales, equating to 4 percent of the expected total car sales in China this year, the brokerage said.

As subsidy plans for commercial cars — vans and other types of vehicles that can seat nine or more passengers — are expected to follow, the brokerage is now overweight on auto stocks in the A-share market as they are likely to outperform the benchmark indexes amid increased supply of new cars, said Yin.

According to the plans announced by the nine ministries, the central government will fund 50 percent of the subsidy money earmarked for eastern provincial-level regions, 60 percent for central provinces and 70 percent for

western provinces. The rest will be funded by local governments.

Wang Liusheng, chief automobile analyst from China Merchants Securities, said such joint efforts will expand the coverage of the trade-in program and lighten the financial burden of local governments. The program will significantly stimulate car consumption in China this year, facilitating the long-term sound development of the country's car industry.

Analysts from Huajin Securities said investors may want to explore potential profit opportunities in auto stocks in the A-share market, as they are part of the new quality productive forces, fueled by continuous technology breakthroughs and facilitating China's high-quality economic development. Auto stocks' current valuations are quite low at present and their gains so far this year have been modest, suggesting huge room for future upside, said Deng Lijun, the brokerage's chief strategist.

During an online media briefing on April 29, Paul Gong, head of China Auto at UBS Global Research, said China's positioning for international carmakers has changed profoundly in recent times. These companies used to complete product development in Germany and Japan, but now they are embedding more technologies developed in China in their new products, said Gong.

"China, which once served as a 'gym' for these automotive companies, has now become a 'university'." Carmakers have learned in-depth knowledge about NEVs and smart technologies in China so that they can improve their competitiveness and prepare for the global launch of new products," he said.

"China used to be a product market where Western car companies sell their end products. Now, the country has become a source of their innovation and technology advancement."

Robin Xing, chief China economist at Morgan Stanley, said it is "unfair" to harp on China's so-called overcapacity. The country's advantages in the field of green transformation are built upon the progress achieved both on the supply and demand sides simultaneously.

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A Tesla Model X vehicle on display during an expo in Yantai, Shandong province last month.
TANG KE / FOR CHINA DAILY

Sources: China mulling Tesla robotaxi tests

By CHENG YU
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China is very likely to support US vehicle maker Tesla's local testing of robotaxis, and may move to consider data compliance issues given that data regulators attended a recent top-level meeting that involved Elon Musk, the automaker's CEO, sources told China Daily on Wednesday.

Experts and domestic self-driving firms believe that Tesla's progress reinforces China's commitment to future upside, said Deng Lijun, the brokerage's chief strategist.

During his recent brief but jam-packed visit to China late last month, Musk specifically proposed rolling out its robotaxi products and services in the Chinese market, in addition to deploying full self-driving software in the country, sources close to the matter told China Daily.

Chinese officials told Musk that China "welcomes Tesla to do some robotaxi tests in the country" and hopes the automaker will "set a good example", the sources said, though Chinese authorities have yet to approve Tesla's widespread use of FSD functions. Before the full rollout of its FSD functions, Tesla still needs to get approval to collect and transfer data that Tesla's cars need to train its driver-assistance features.

Though the data problem wasn't discussed in great detail during Musk's visit, a source linked to the visit believes that authorities are "apparently considering" the data issue.

The source said that a top official from the National Development and Reform Commission, which currently oversees the National Data Bureau, was seen attending the top-level meeting with Musk. Officials attending the meeting were "very limited" in number this time, so the NDRC's attendance is considered to be of great significance, he disclosed.

The Ministry of Natural Resources said all intelligent driving systems are required to obtain official qualification before they can operate on public roadways. Foreign companies need to partner with domestic counterparts that have obtained the qualification due to data concerns.

In April, Chinese internet giant Baidu held a news conference announcing a collaboration with Tesla, including the launch of its advanced lane-level navigation specialized for the US firm, which ignited reports saying that the two may in fact have already inked a qualification deal for Tesla's potential rollout of its robotaxi services in China.

A source told China Daily that the latest cooperation means that for the accuracy of Baidu's mapping services provided to Tesla has been improved to a great extent, but he did not witness any new deals related to the rollout of FSD functions or qualification between the two — at least during Musk's recent visit.

However, the source said that Baidu is likely to become the qualification partner of Tesla if the latter is able to operate its robotaxis in Chi-

na, as the two companies initiated their partnership in 2020 in which Tesla integrated Baidu's navigation map into its vehicles in the country. Both Tesla and Baidu had not yet commented on the issue as of publishing time. Tesla's Nasdaq-listed shares closed 3.76 percent lower on Tuesday local time for a variety of reasons.

Despite rising geopolitical tensions, such as the potential TikTok ban in the United States, Lu Yan, an independent analyst and a veteran in the new energy sector, said: "The tie-up shows that the Chinese government, on the other hand, is devoted to an open market and welcomes foreign players like Tesla, BMW and Mercedes-Benz to implement advanced smart driving technologies in China, and provides a broad marketplace that allows both Chinese and foreign technologies to bloom and make progress together."

Peng Jun, co-founder and CEO of domestic leading self-driving startup Ponyai, said: "We are very happy to see companies like Tesla joining the autonomous driving sector, which will be a good thing for the development of the entire industry. For an emerging industry like autonomous driving, we are all working toward the same goal of achieving a comprehensive and prosperous development of the industry. Applications from assisted driving to higher-level autonomous driving are expanding rapidly, and the commercialization and application of autonomous driving technologies are expected to usher in explosive growth."

Briefly

Tianjin's Q1 e-trade
\$1.1b, up 12% y-o-y

North China's port city of Tianjin reported a total cross-border e-commerce foreign trade of 7.9 billion yuan (\$1.1 billion) in the first quarter of this year, up 12 percent year-on-year, accounting for 4.1 percent of

the city's foreign trade, according to the Tianjin municipal bureau of commerce.

PBOC adds liquidity
via reverse repos

China's central bank conducted 2 billion yuan (\$281.6 million) of

seven-day reverse repos at an interest rate of 1.8 percent on Wednesday. The move aims to keep liquidity reasonable and ample in the banking system, the People's Bank of China said in a statement.

XINHUA - CHINA DAILY

AEO boost to foster additional trade

By ZHONG NAN and WANG XU
in Shenzhen, Guangdong

China will broaden the scope of the Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) program to encompass emerging sectors such as cross-border e-commerce and a wide array of small and medium-sized enterprises, thus bolstering commercial exchanges both domestically and globally, said a senior Customs official on Wednesday.

The AEO program is advocated by the World Customs Organization (WCO) to strengthen international supply chain security and facilitate the movement of legitimate goods.

Under the program, Customs authorities from various countries and regions form partnerships with industries to collaboratively cut barriers to Customs procedures and enhance international trade efficiency.

China will work with other WCO members to expand institutional openness in areas such as Customs

rules, regulations, management methods and standards to assist more domestic and foreign companies in foreign trade, said Wang Lingjun, vice-minister of China's General Administration of Customs.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the WCO Global AEO Conference 2024 in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, on Wednesday, Wang said China will explore the establishment of a regional AEO mutual recognition cooperation mechanism to promote global trade interconnectivity.

By the end of March this year, China had signed AEO mutual recognition agreements with 26 economies, such as the European Union and South Africa, covering 52 countries and regions.

Ian Saunders, secretary-general of the Brussels-based WCO, said it is necessary to simplify the requirements for the AEO program to make it more accessible to small and medium-sized enterprises while ensuring a comprehensive understanding of

the compliance environment.

It is essential to strengthen the arrangements of mutual recognition agreements and forms of international technical cooperation to expand the advantages of the AEO program and make it more attractive, said Saunders.

Currently, China has more than 5,800 companies with AEO qualifications. Last year, they accounted for 20.5 percent of China's total Customs declarations, contributing 37.1 percent of the national import and export value and 37 percent of tax revenue, said the GAC.

Song Yiwen, president of the supply chain management department at Shenzhen-based Honor Device Co, said that after obtaining AEO qualification in 2021, the company has benefited from efficiency improvements and convenient policies brought by the AEO system.

"As a representative of an AEO enterprise in the field of intelligent devices in China, the system enables companies to be more competitive



Two Customs officials of Guangzhou Customs check ceramic capacitor products. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

in the international market and gain the trust of partners more easily," said Song, adding that after achieving the status, the inspection rate for the company's products has dropped by 80 percent.

Sharing similar views, Zhang Aixin, president of Valeo Niles (Guangzhou) Electronics Co — an auto parts and electronic compo-

nents manufacturer — said since obtaining AEO certification at the end of 2023, the company's import and export volumes have been continuously increasing, and they are expected to grow by 20 percent year-on-year this year.

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Syngenta to
tackle crop
impact on
climateBy WANG ZHUOQIONG
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Seeds and pesticides maker Syngenta Group has released a report prioritizing key innovation areas to produce more food with less climate impact.

"The future of agriculture hinges upon sustainability ... Our priorities ensure the integration of sustainability at both strategic and operational levels in a way that will truly provide long-term value," said Jeff Rowe, CEO of Syngenta Group.

The group will focus on boosting soil health, driving digital innovation and supporting biological revolution, said Alexandra Brand, executive vice-president of sustainability and corporate affairs of Syngenta.

She said agriculture is increasingly becoming technology-intensive because it links with life and environment amid a great deal of uncertainty.

"Innovation is the answer to two major challenges of feeding a growing population and tackling climate change," said Brand, adding that the group, whose 2023 sales reached \$9.6 billion in China and \$32.2 billion worldwide, is committed to bringing and advancing more such global innovations to China, where it employs more than 19,000.

For example, some of the group's world-class crop protection technologies have a significant opportunity to lower pesticide use by as much as 90 percent. Agriculture accounts for 22 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and 70 percent of the world's freshwater use.

Another example is Syngenta's broad-spectrum fungicide Adepidyn. In less than four years since its introduction in the Chinese market, Adepidyn technology has contributed to more than 800 metric tons of reduced pesticide usage, with more than 6 billion kilograms of added yields, and adding 30 billion yuan (\$4.1 billion) to farmers' income.

The project is one of the incentives for Syngenta to create its open platform in China, known as MAP or Modern Agriculture Platform, which combines Syngenta's global and local agricultural input innovations across seeds, pesticides, fertilizers and biologicals.

Though MAP, the company is expected to introduce more digital and modern farming practices and services, to better serve and support local farmers through more integrated solutions.

"As one of our new set of sustainability priorities and targets, we have committed to expanding our MAP centers to 1,000 across China by 2028 and increasing the income of served farmers versus non-served farmers by 8 percent," said Brand, who visited Beijing recently.

The group has invested in cutting carbon emissions through the establishment of its first carbon neutral factory at its crop protection plant in Kunshan, Jiangsu province.

The team has been embedding carbon-reduction practices across its operations — from production to packaging, and across supply chains, she said.

Syngenta encourages the adoption of regenerative agriculture practices so as to help farmers improve productivity, soil health, biodiversity and climate as well as their income and access to inputs, knowledge, finance and markets, she said.

The new priorities leverage the power of innovation, guide investments and collaboration as well as add a new level of transparency through a Portfolio Sustainability Framework, Syngenta said in its report.

BUSINESSFOCUS

CHINA UP-CLOSE

May Day air travel back in business

Outbound tourist flows return to pre-pandemic 2019 magnitude

By ZHU WENQIAN
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Travel abroad was popular for Chinese tourists during the recent May Day holiday, and they traveled further to some niche destinations like Saudi Arabia, in addition to traditional hot spots like Southeast Asia, industry players said.

During the five-day holiday that lasted from May 1 to Sunday, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore were among the top 10 overseas destinations for Chinese travelers, as the latter three Southeast Asian countries all adopted visa-free entries for Chinese visitors, said Qunar, a Beijing-based online travel agency.

The total booking volumes of international flights and overseas hotels for the May Day holiday both hit new highs on the platform, Qunar said.

Saudi Arabia, Spain, Hungary, France, Austria and Italy saw significant growth in the number of travel product bookings on a yearly basis. In addition, some Chinese tourists booked trips to Murmansk, Russia; Athens and Santorini in Greece; as well as some smaller cities in Spain and Portugal, the agency said.

"For traditional popular overseas destinations such as Japan, France, the United Kingdom and Switzerland, Chinese travelers are no longer satisfied with simple sightseeing, and increasingly have been exploring small towns in-depth," said Xiao Peng, a researcher with Qunar's big data research institute.

Chinese visitors arrived at Burgundy, France — a renowned wine cultivation region — or Otaru, Japan, the movie-shooting backdrop for the Japanese hit film *Love Letter*. They also visited Zermatt, Switzerland, where travelers can go skiing all year round, and even Recife, Brazil, hometown of former soccer star Ronaldo, Xiao said.

Outbound tours organized in small groups and with flexible schedules were popular among Chinese travelers, and they preferred self-guided tours for short-haul trips and group tours for long-haul trips, said Tuniu, an online travel agency.

For instance, travelers mainly booked packages that included both flight tickets and hotels, and took self-guided tours in places such as the Maldives, Bali Island of Indonesia, Singapore and Japan, Tuniu found.

During the May Day holiday, cruises were also sought after by Chinese consumers. Many voyages that departed from Shanghai to Fukuoka, Japan, as well as from Shanghai to Okinawa, Japan, were nearly sold out, Tuniu said.

Meanwhile, since Saudi Arabia was officially listed as a tourist destination



Tourists flock to the Louvre Museum in Paris on May 3. FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

“... Chinese travelers are no longer satisfied with simple sightseeing, and increasingly have been exploring small towns in-depth.”

Xiao Peng, researcher with Qunar's big data research institute

nation for outbound group tours catering to Chinese citizens last year, the niche destination has attracted the attention of an increasing number of Chinese pleasure travelers. As part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the country aims to attract 3 million Chinese visitors a year by 2030 amid significant growth in its tourism sector, according to the Saudi Tourism Authority.

The authority has also promoted its Middle Eastern local travel resources on Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Douyin, and tailored content and experiences for Chinese tourists.

Saudia, the kingdom's national flag carrier, has expanded its route network, connecting Saudi Arabia with key destinations worldwide. In August, Saudia launched direct flights between Jeddah and Beijing. Previously, Guangzhou,



Saudi men ride their horses past the Maraya (Mirror), the world's largest mirrored building, in Saudi Arabia's northwestern desert region, in January. PATRICK BAZ / AFP

Guangdong province, was the sole Chinese destination for Saudia.

"As we play a crucial role in the kingdom's economic transformation and the realization of Vision 2030, we remain committed to sustaining this growth trajectory and continuing to elevate Saudia as a symbol of hospitality," said Khaled Tash, the carrier's chief marketing officer.

Meanwhile, Hunan TV's popular

travel reality show *Divas Hit the Road* features Saudi Arabia in its recent season. It showcases the beautiful sightseeing spots and delicacies of the peninsula, as well as Chinese companies' development in the country, and has attracted a large number of young Chinese tourists.

Guangzhou-based China Southern Airlines recently launched a new route connecting Beijing and Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia. The

debut flight departed Beijing Daxing International Airport on April 16, using an Airbus A330 aircraft, marking the launch of the first regular direct passenger flight by a domestic carrier from the Chinese mainland to Saudi Arabia.

"China and Saudi Arabia have seen increasingly closer economic and trade exchanges. The launch of the Beijing Daxing-Riyadh route represents the deepening coopera-

tion between the two countries in economy, culture, tourism and other fields," said Zhang Dongsheng, deputy director of marketing at China Southern Airlines.

"This route will help significantly promote personnel, economic and trade exchanges between China and Saudi Arabia, and build a more convenient air bridge for mutual understanding and friendship for people from the two countries," Zhang said.

Currently, China Southern operates eight direct flights connecting Beijing Daxing and cities participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, including Almaty, Kazakhstan and Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan. Soon, it plans to launch flights linking Beijing Daxing with Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The carrier said it would continuously launch new flights and add more frequencies to existing flights that connect China with cities in BRI economies. By providing more convenient flight options, this will help build air channels for Sino-foreign economic and trade exchanges and international logistics, and make greater contributions to the initiative.

Booming travel demand has driven growth of the air travel market. In the first quarter, the total number of passenger trips handled in China, including via domestic and international flights, reached nearly 180 million, said the Civil Aviation Administration of China.

The figure, a new high for a first quarter, jumped 37.7 percent on a yearly basis, and grew by 10.2 percent compared to pre-pandemic levels seen in 2019, the CAAC said.

Specifically, domestic flights in the January-March period handled 160 million passenger trips, up 14.3 percent over 2019 levels, and international flights handled 14.1 million passenger trips, rebounding to 78 percent of 2019 figures, the CAAC found.

The global air travel market has also witnessed strong growth momentum.

The International Air Transport Association recently released data for March, showing that total demand, measured in revenue-passenger kilometers, grew 13.8 percent compared to March 2023. The passenger load factor in March was 82 percent.

"Demand for travel is strong, and there is every indication that this should continue into the peak Northern Hemisphere summer travel season. It is critical that we have the capacity to meet this demand and ensure a hassle-free travel experience for passengers," said Willie Walsh, IATA's director-general.

"That means making urgent progress to resolve supply chain issues and for airports and air traffic management to be fully staffed and operating at maximum efficiency," Walsh said.

In particular, Asia-Pacific airlines continued to lead in March and saw a 38.5 percent year-on-year increase in demand. Capacity increased 37.4 percent year-on-year and the load factor rose to 85.6 percent, the highest among all regions, the IATA found.

China-Vietnam border tourism boom seen over recently concluded holiday

NANNING — Vuong Van Thanh, a tour guide from Vietnam, recently led 19 compatriots across the Beilunhe Bridge connecting the Vietnamese city of Mong Cai with China's Dongxing for a one-day tour of the border city in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

Separated from Mong Cai only by a river, Dongxing facilitates close interactions between border residents of China and Vietnam. It is also a popular tourist destination for Vietnamese tourists looking to experience Chinese customs and cuisine.

"Our guests are very interested in Chinese food and think it is very distinctive. This time, they have come for a special chicken soup," the tour guide said.

According to data from Fliggy, one of China's leading travel platforms, outbound travel experienced a peak in bookings during the recent May Day holiday, with bookings for travel services seeing strong growth of nearly 100 percent. Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries were among the popular destinations for

outbound tourism from China.

One-day tours to border cities such as Dongxing and Pingxiang, including shopping in supermarkets, buying small household appliances and sampling delicious foods, have become popular among Vietnamese tourists in recent years.

The May Day holiday is a statutory break in both China and Vietnam, and it is also a peak season for cross-border tourism for people from the two countries.

The general border inspection station in Guangxi expects that more than 140,000 inbound and outbound passengers traveled through Dongxing Port this May Day holiday, and Youyiguan Port likely saw more than 45,000 inbound and outbound passengers.

"During the May Day holiday, more than 200 tour groups are expected to have entered and exited the country in a single day. In order to cope with the peak passenger flow, we promptly communicated with Vietnamese travel agencies and inspection departments to obtain transit information of tour groups in advance, so as to reduce

“We hope to cooperate with more Vietnamese travel agencies and domestic car clubs, so that more Chinese self-driving tour enthusiasts can ... enjoy exotic scenery, taste special delicacies and experience folk customs.”

Liang Yunyan, general manager of Pingxiang Peace International Travel Service Co Ltd

waiting time for passengers and provide a better travel experience for them," said Huang Yejiang, who works for the Dongxing entry-exit border checkpoint.

"During the May Day holiday, our agency's more than 20 Vietnamese-speaking tour guides were all booked, and they were simply too busy," said Ye Xiaozhou, deputy general manager of Pingxiang South International Travel Agency Co Ltd, adding that cross-border tourism is recovering rapidly.

Self-driving tours are also a new trend in cross-border tourism between China and Vietnam.

During the holiday, Pingxiang

Peace International Travel Service Co Ltd organized a cross-border self-driving tour involving 13 vehicles and 29 people, which visited Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, Halong Bay and other places in Vietnam.

"We hope to cooperate with more Vietnamese travel agencies and domestic car clubs, so that more Chinese self-driving tour enthusiasts can travel to Vietnam through Friendship Pass, enjoy exotic scenery, taste special delicacies and experience folk customs," said Liang Yunyan, general manager of the travel agency.

Cross-border tourism has flourished with the deepening of tourism cooperation between China and



People visit the China-Vietnam Detian Waterfall cross-border tourism cooperation zone in the border city of Chongzuo in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. CAO YIMING / XINHUA

Vietnam. The two sides have worked together to explore new forms of cross-border tourism and promote the construction of cross-border tourism cooperation zones.

The China-Vietnam Detian Waterfall cross-border tourism cooperation zone, which began trial operations on Sept 15 in the border

city of Chongzuo in Guangxi, has witnessed an increase in the number of tourists from both countries.

The zone also rolled out a series of events to attract tourists during the May Day holiday, including talks and interactive activities.

XINHUA

COMMENT

Editorials

Visit provides fresh impetus to boost dynamism of Sino-Serbian friendship

Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in Belgrade, capital of Serbia, on Tuesday night for a state visit to the Republic of Serbia on the second leg of his European trip.

Unlike his first stop in France, where he discussed some of the thorniest issues affecting China's relations with not only France but also the European Union, the Chinese leader will have had easier discussions in the Balkan country, whose friendly relations with China have remained steadfast.

If his meetings in France with President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen were about improving ties and deepening mutual understanding, those with his Serbian hosts will have been on ways to carry forward and strengthen the amity and close cooperation between the two countries.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has been a staunch supporter of friendly ties with China despite the geopolitical headwinds across Europe. He has defied the recent European tendency to target China as a "systemic rival" and offered his support for Beijing's proposals against major-power competition and for peace and cooperation.

With long-standing cordiality dating back to the era of socialist Yugoslavia, the friendship between China and present-day Serbia has stood the test of dramatic geopolitical changes. The Chinese leader's visit will only cement and upgrade what has already been in his own words an example of fine state-to-state relations, making the friendship between the two countries even more dynamic.

The relationship between the two countries carries very special significance today as both countries seek to carry forward their traditional friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation amid the increasing global volatility.

In addition to expanding their common interests in economic and trade cooperation, the two countries have also sought and found broad common ground on regional and global affairs.

The importance the Chinese leader attaches to the bilateral relationship is obvious in the title of his signed article published in a local newspaper, *Politika*: "Let the Light of Ironclad Friendship Illuminate the Road of China-Serbia Cooperation".

Such amity has prospered particularly under the Chinese president's own watch. It was during his first visit to Belgrade in 2016 that the two countries established a strategic partnership. Last year, he and visiting President Vucic witnessed the signing of dozens of new cooperation agreements in Beijing, including a free trade deal expected to take effect in July.

China was Serbia's second-largest trading partner, after the European Union, last year with a total trade exchange of \$6.1 billion, and it was among its top five investors. Serbia is a firm supporter of the Belt and Road Initiative. China-financed infrastructure projects under the framework of the initiative have become key development boosters of the country.

Serbian enthusiasm for Chinese economic and trade connections stands in sharp contrast with the noise in Europe for "de-risking" from China. That the Chinese president's arrival in Serbia coincided with the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy has been widely interpreted as a pointed message on the growing unease between Beijing and the bloc that, encouraged by Washington, is seeking to extend its tentacles to the Asia-Pacific region citing "systematic challenges" posed by China.

"The Chinese people cherish peace, but we will never allow such tragic history to repeat itself," the Chinese leader said in the *Politika* article.

There is concern that the EU's growing unease about China's development momentum may be recklessly exploited by the string-puller of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to a crisis-causing degree.

Beijing looks forward to taking Xi's visit as an opportunity to keep relations with Europe on the right track of healthy development, so that the latter can view its relationship with China more objectively.

Europe: Trip to strengthen ties

From page 1

cooperative relationship with China. This year marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, which is supported by a comprehensive strategic partnership. Additionally, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, France holds a significant position on the global stage. French President Emmanuel Macron advocates the concept of strategic autonomy for Europe, focusing on sovereignty and reducing reliance on American influence.

Hungary, another EU member state, is often seen as the most influenced by China within the EU bloc. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban pursues a multi-vector foreign policy, fostering strong ties with Russia and China, which sometimes deviates from EU norms and faces indignation from some other EU nations and officials. This year, as China and Hungary celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations, President Xi's visit is anticipated to strengthen Sino-European relations, injecting stability and positive dynamics into the complex global scene. Furthermore, Hungary is involved in building Europe's longest high-speed rail line, which extends approximately 1,500 km from Budapest to Athens. Hungary has also attracted substantial investments from major Chinese firms like BYD, a leading electric vehicle manufacturer that is setting up a plant there, and CATL, a key battery producer.

Serbia, an EU candidate and a small country strategically located at the crossroads of Central and Southeastern Europe, has become an important partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Its geostrategic position makes Serbia a gateway to Europe, particularly through the land route that seeks to connect Greece to the heart of Europe. This strategic importance is the primary reason for several major infrastructure projects in Serbia, such as the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway, a flagship project of the BRI. Predominantly financed and constructed by Chinese companies, this railway is designed to improve the transportation of goods from Serbia to broader European markets.

This year marks the 15th anniversary of bilateral relations between China and Serbia, highlighted by the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership eight years ago during President Xi's visit to Belgrade. The collaboration between the two nations is based on mutual respect and benefit, fostering prosperity and significantly contributing to Serbia's development and revitalization. The partnership is multidimensional and mutually advantageous, encompassing all key areas of cooperation.

As global dynamics shift, the strategic partnership between Serbia and China continues to strengthen, creating significant implications for regional politics and economic development. This relationship, however, is unfolding against the backdrop of increased scrutiny from the European Union, particularly following its recent anti-subsidy investigation into Chinese electric vehicles. This investigation reflects broader concerns about fair competition and market practices, placing Serbia in a unique position as it balances its national interests with its aspirations toward EU integration.

Despite the critics and lack of understanding from Brussels, Serbia is China's first comprehensive strategic partner in Central and Eastern Europe, and the two countries share a deep and steadfast friendship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the absence of substantial international solidarity was often present, China and Serbia collaborated closely to save lives.

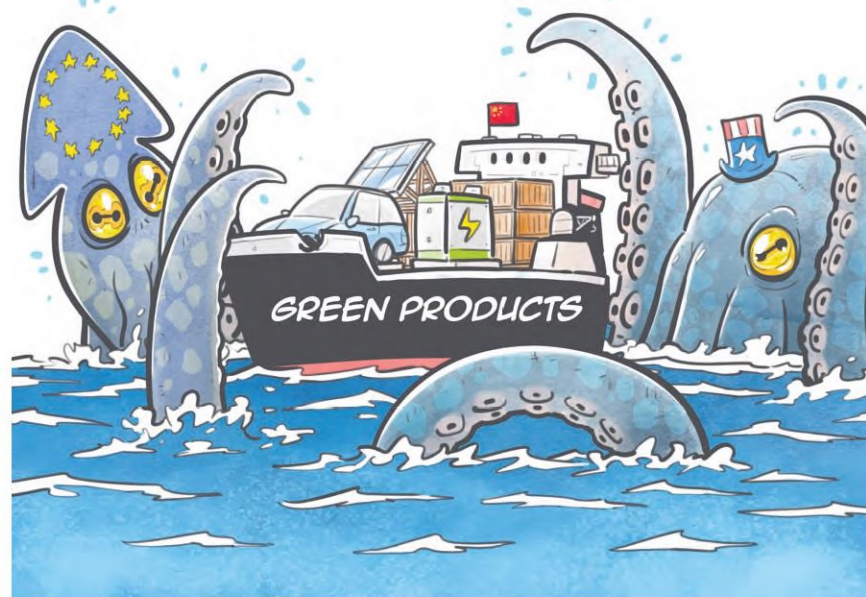
The imminent visit of President Xi to Belgrade further reinforces the long-standing bond between the two nations. Often described as "steel friends," this term reflects not only their robust cooperation in the steel sector, highlighted by the major Chinese investment in Hesteel Smederevo, but also their resilient traditional friendship that has overcome various challenges over time.

There is significant potential for developing a deeper and comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Serbia in many areas such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, healthcare, and information technology. The future of Sino-Serbian cooperation could see a significant focus on technological advancement and green energy, which would not only benefit both countries but also align with global sustainability goals. Moreover, after the signing of free trade agreement, new opportunities for strengthening their ironclad friendship will appear.

The current EU anti-subsidy probe into Chinese EVs presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Serbia. The challenge lies in navigating the EU's concerns about so-called market distortion potentially caused by Chinese subsidies, which could affect Serbia's own market as it integrates more closely with the EU. Conversely, Serbia has the opportunity to promote fair competition and transparent economic practices, potentially alleviating EU concerns and enhancing cooperation between China and the EU. Serbia's relationship with China can serve as a bridge in fostering better understanding and cooperation between China and the European Union.

The author is a researcher at the Faculty of Political Sciences at University of Belgrade, Serbia. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

Visa-free policy can consolidate people-to-people exchanges

China's inbound travel bookings for the five-day May Day holiday increased by 130 percent year-on-year.

The National Immigration Administration predicted in late April that the average daily number of people entering and leaving China's ports during the five-day holiday would reach 1.76 million, an increase of 40.5 percent over the same period last year. The recovery and fast growth of the number of inbound and outbound visits is to a large extent attributed to the optimization of national exit and entry policies by China in the past year.

On Nov 24, China decided to implement a de facto unilateral visa-free policy for ordinary passport holders from France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Malaysia from Dec 1, 2023, to Nov 30, 2024. On March 14, the country extended the same policy to Switzer-

land, Ireland, Hungary, Austria, Belgium and Luxembourg from March 14 to Nov 30. In the first quarter of this year, China introduced a series of entry-exit policy measures to facilitate foreigners' access to China by expanding visa-free entry for certain foreign nationals, while vigorously improving governance and services. As a result, China saw more than 141 million inbound and outbound travels in the first quarter, an increase of 117.8 percent year-on-year, which also exceeded the full-year entry and exit flows in any of the three years during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The continuous optimization of exit and entry policies has greatly facilitated cross-border personnel exchanges, making international exchanges and cooperation increasingly frequent. It has not only strengthened economic ties between countries, but also

enhanced the mutual understanding and integration of different cultures, promoted the prosperity of tourism and lubricated the overall economic and social development. Greater entry and exit optimization policies adopted by some major Chinese cities have also resulted in a significant increase in their entry-exit personnel flows in the first quarter of this year.

China's determination to advance reform and opening-up remains unwavering and it will only open up wider to the rest of the world. During the top leader's recent visit to France, a decision was taken to further extend the visa-free policy for short-term visits to China to 12 European countries until the end of 2025. This will further boost personnel exchanges between China and these countries.

— THEPAPER.CN

Future rides on hydrogen energy industry

Sichuan province is going all out to support the hydrogen energy industry's development. This follows a conference held in late April on further promoting the application of the hydrogen industry chain. The Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang Uygur autonomous regions also have abundant traditional and new energy resources.

Constructing a complete industry chain and ecosystem, and addressing the problem of high storage and transportation costs are of great significance for building a nationwide zero-carbon, low-cost and reliable green hydrogen supply system.

China's 10,000-ton-level photovoltaic hydrogen production project in Xinjiang has participated in transactions totaling over 100 million kilowatt-hours of electricity and is steadily moving toward full-capacity production. More companies have seen the optimistic prospects and are actively collaborating to promote industry upgrades.

Buses and heavy trucks are increasingly running on hydrogen, and Jiaxing Port in East China's Zhejiang province is seeing large-scale deployment of hydrogen energy heavy trucks.

To accelerate the establishment of

the Yangtze River Delta hydrogen energy innovation and application demonstration area, the local government provides support for the purchase of hydrogen energy buses, and construction and operation of hydrogen refueling stations.

Hydrogen energy also has broad application prospects in fields such as metallurgy and petroleum refining. That requires the strengthening of technological research, and the enhancement of technological innovation. It also calls for mature market mechanisms and substantial policy support.

— ECONOMIC DAILY

What They Say

China-Russia relationship all above board

Editor's Note: China's ambassador to Russia, Zhang Hanhui, was interviewed by Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency on Tuesday. The following are excerpts of Zhang's responses to questions on Sino-Russian ties, the Ukraine crisis, and other issues:

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Russia. China is willing to work with Russia to strengthen multilateral strategic collaboration in BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other multilateral fora, and promote reform of the global governance system.

In 2023, China imported 107 million tons of Russian crude oil, a year-on-year increase of 24 percent. It is believed that with the joint efforts of both parties, the Sino-Russian crude oil trade will continue to maintain healthy and stable development in the future.

The US sanctions against Russia have caused certain problems in the trade settlement between China and Russia. But the two sides are currently actively striving to find an effective solution as soon as possible.

Unilateralism and power politics have made the Eurasian continent increasingly unstable.

As permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, China and Russia can work closely together on the international stage to jointly defend true multilateralism, which is conducive to maintaining Eurasian security and global strategic stability.

China is willing to continue to work with Russia to strengthen strategic coordination, join hands in implementing global security initiatives, jointly defend international fairness and justice, and make new contributions to maintaining international and regional security and stability.

It has been more than two years since the crisis in Ukraine erupted. The most urgent thing now is to restore peace. China has always upheld an objective and fair stance on the Ukraine crisis, always stood on the side of peace and dialogue, and actively promoted peace and talks. China has always maintained in-depth communication with both

parties, and the international community, and it is playing a constructive role in promoting talks.

Not long ago, China carried out the second round of shuttle diplomacy and had in-depth exchanges with Russia, Ukraine and relevant European countries on how to achieve an early cease-fire and end the war and promote a political settlement of the crisis.

Under the current situation, in order to prevent the conflict from spiraling out of control, all parties should work together to restore peace at an early date. China supports the timely convening of an international peace conference recognized by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation by all relevant parties, and fair discussion of all peace plans.

China is willing to continue to play its unique role and contribute Chinese wisdom and strength to promote the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis.

COMMENT



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

Song Xin

Beijing's ties with CEE countries benefit the whole of Europe

The European Union's perception of China has undergone a significant shift in recent years. It now sees China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival all at once. But despite the change in the EU's perception, there is still strong complementarity between the two economies, as they are closely intertwined in terms of trade and industry.

China's cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe has been gaining increasing significance within its broader engagement with the entire European continent.

First, compared with their Western European counterparts, CEE countries, especially Hungary and Serbia, have a more welcoming attitude toward foreign investors and investments. This openness is exemplified by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's "Open to the East" policy and reindustrialization plan, which offer generous subsidies to foreign investors relocating their production units to Hungary and thus creating local jobs. In 2023, Hungary attracted a record €13 billion (\$13.97 billion) in foreign direct investment, with China being the top investor. This approach prioritizes creating synergy, making CEE countries more attractive to Chinese investors.

Second, the cost of labor in the CEE countries is significantly lower than in Western Europe. On average, a worker in the CEE region earns one-third to half of what his or her counterpart in Western Europe makes. Apart from that, investors in some Western European countries face additional financial and redundancy costs, which can create problems when setting up and/or managing factories. In contrast, the CEE countries offer a less costly and more flexible labor market, attracting Chinese companies looking to optimize their production costs.

Third, countries such as Hungary already have a strong industrial base, particularly in the automobile and battery sectors. Many well-known brands including BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Volkswagen, Nissan, Ford, Kia, Skoda, Toyota and Fiat have set up factories in Hungary. In fact, Audi has created four times more jobs in Hungary than in Germany — and on April 26, it announced an additional \$320 million investment in its Hungarian plant to increase the production of electric engines.

Besides, key players in the supply chains such

as Continental and Robert Bosch have significantly increased their investments in Hungary to keep pace with the latest developments in the auto industry. This existing industrial ecosystem makes the CEE countries an attractive destination for Chinese companies looking to expand their presence in Europe.

Although market entities in China and the EU have been engaging in cooperation despite the ideological differences between the two sides, industrial players in Western Europe have become a victim of the ideological disagreements. They have been hit hard by rising energy prices following the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In particular, the German economy experienced negative growth for two consecutive quarters in 2023.

Also, due to Washington's inflation-fighting legislation, price-sensitive industries and companies are shifting bases to the United States lured by US subsidies, leading to the closure of factories, leading to job losses, in Europe. And as more barriers and filters are built between Western European companies and Chinese enterprises, which have the most resilient and extensive supply chains, the costs for European companies are rising rapidly.

However, the shift of EU-China cooperation toward Central and Eastern Europe has not gone unnoticed by Western European countries. Raising concerns about the potential economic and political consequences of this growing partnership, some have claimed that increasing Chinese investment and influence in the region could undermine the EU's unity and its ability to maintain a coherent stance on China-related issues. Some have even claimed that the technology transfer and knowledge sharing associated with Chinese investments could, in the long run, lead to a loss of competitive advantage for Western European companies.

It is important, however, to realize the EU-China relationship is not a zero-sum game; it can bring benefits to the EU as a whole, in the shape of increased trade, more job creation and economic growth. By engaging with China, the CEE countries can help bridge the gap between the EU and China, fostering cooperation on a range of issues, from climate change to global governance.

The "de-risking" narrative now dominates the discourse in the EU. De-risking, a business term, means diversifying risks to achieve better

economic performance. But what EU policy-makers are doing in the name of de-risking is undermining the EU's economic performance and harming European society.

The intensification of high-level exchanges between China and the EU, therefore, is the right time to reassess the EU's real interests and explore cooperative actions that can help the two sides move beyond the de-risking narrative. By focusing on mutually beneficial cooperation and addressing common challenges, the EU and China can help build a more prosperous and stable future for people on both sides. This is because despite the ideological differences, the complementary aspects of China-EU relations remain robust.

As for the shifting of EU-China cooperation toward CEE countries, it has been influenced by several factors, including a more receptive attitude to foreign investment, lower cost of labor and an established industrial base. For years, the EU has struggled with its policy toward Central and Eastern Europe, with more talent and investment flowing from former Soviet republics to the West than vice versa. As we enter a new phase of China-EU relations, investments from China could help these countries catch up in terms of manufacturing, research and job creation.

With Western Europe-based industries facing the challenges posed by ideological tensions, rising energy costs and the lure of US incentives, the CEE countries are becoming increasingly attractive destinations for Chinese investors. These complexities underscore the multifaceted and dynamic nature of EU-China relations and the need to foster cooperation and mutual understanding by overcoming geopolitical obstacles.

Especially, the EU must balance its concerns over China's growing influence with the potential benefits of enhanced cooperation, while ensuring that the concerns of all EU member states are addressed. By reassessing the de-risking narrative and prioritizing mutually beneficial cooperation, the EU and China can build a more prosperous future for their peoples and the international community as a whole.

The author is the founder of Sinnvoll Think Tank and former policy advisor at the European Parliament. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Maya Majueran

China's EV industry driving global green development

Certain US and European politicians have been pointing fingers at China's electric vehicle industry. However, it is absurd for them to criticize China's EV sector, which plays a significant role in driving global green development.

Electric vehicles (EVs), and their pricing, carbon emissions reduction, longevity and availability are the common topics of discussion in many circles. All EVs, also called new energy vehicles (NEVs), have an electric motor instead of an internal combustion engine. There are also plug-in hybrid EVs and fuel-cell EVs.

Unlike traditional vehicles, electric vehicles (EVs) can reduce emissions because they run on rechargeable electric batteries. Battery electric vehicles (BEVs) produce no tailpipe emissions and operate without a combustion engine. As the world transitions from "global warming" to "global boiling", it is essential to embrace new energy vehicles as a means to mitigate emissions.

The global EV market is advancing rapidly. In 2023, for example, about 13.6 million EVs were sold worldwide. Global sales are forecast to grow by 25-30 percent this year, with McKinsey predicting worldwide EV demand to grow six-fold from 2021 to 2030.

BEVs and plug-in hybrid EVs represented 15.8 percent of global light vehicle sales last year, with China boasting the highest market share of NEVs followed by the Nordic countries. The fastest-growing markets included Türkiye, Brazil, Thailand, Malaysia, and Australia. China's role in combating global warming in this regard should be appreciated rather than chided.

It's true China is the leader in EV production and sales. It not only produced and sold the highest number of EVs (9.58 million and 9.49 million units respectively), but also exported 1.2 million EVs last year. And it is expected to produce 11.5 million and export 5.5 million EVs this year.

It should be noted that China's export of EVs have been rapidly increasing due to their quality and performance, rather than due to overcapacity. Some Western politicians often attempt to deny China's market economy status. Instead of doing that, they should embrace a more open global market, allowing market forces to determine market share and enabling consumers to decide which products to purchase. China's growing share of the EV market globally is a result of natural market forces and healthy competition.

What's more, China's EV sector also contributes to global technology development.

The country has made its EV production process more efficient by building special industry and supply chains, and large industry clusters in the Yangtze River Delta, Pearl River Delta and the Chengdu-Chongqing regions.

Over the past decade, China has invested massively to further develop EV technology, and its policies and technological advancements have contributed immensely to its

success in the global EV market. In particular, China's advancements in battery technology have been a game changer.

And while China has established the world's largest battery manufacturing value chain, Chinese EV-makers have spent billions of dollars to develop smart car features to make their vehicles safer and more comfortable for consumers, by adding more features such as AI-powered smart car systems, and helping improve the voice recognition and automated parking systems. They are also investing in new features to connect their EVs to phones and home appliances in what is being called a "Human x Car x Home" ecosystem.

In fact, Chinese EV-makers are offering feature-rich, technologically advanced vehicles at competitive prices with strong after-sales support.

But as long as consumers in the developed economies are satisfied with Chinese EVs, it will not be easy for the US and the EU to stop China from leading the global EV market.

Competitors should adhere to market rules and ensure a level playing field for all market participants. China's EV-maker BYD overtook US-funded Tesla as the world's biggest EV-making company last year, and China overtook Japan as the world's largest car exporter.

What US and EU politicians should do is to refrain from accusing China's EV sector under the guise of safeguarding national security, and instead allow market players to make their own choice. Just as Elon Musk is increasing investment and participating in the competition in the Chinese market.

However, some countries and automakers are worried about China's success in the global EV market, though they understand that it's not easy to compete with China, as it has established an efficient technological innovation ecosystem and has a huge production capacity. The US and the EU, which benefited from automobile trade for many decades, are now trying to restrict China's EV exports to their markets in an act of economic bullying.

While the European Commission recently launched an anti-subsidy investigation into EV imports to find an excuse to stop Chinese EVs from entering the EU market, the US has been complaining about the oversupply of EVs. But as long as consumers in the developed economies are satisfied with Chinese EVs, it will not be easy for the US and the EU to stop China from leading the global EV market.

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GLOBAL VIEWS



SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY

ZHENG CHUNRONG AND WANG XIAOTONG

Adjustment of EU-NATO relations and its impacts on China-EU ties

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine crisis has accelerated the reorganization of the global political, economic and security pattern. Against the context of structural changes in the European security order, geopolitical competition and major-power strategic competition returning



Zheng Chunrong



Wang Xiaotong

to Europe, the European Union and NATO have been coordinating closely. First, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has increased the EU's dependence on the United States and NATO. The military expenditure of the EU and NATO has reached a record high. The EU and NATO have reinforced their military capabilities and strengthened information sharing and coordinated action in the field of security and defense, in order to develop a more unified position on technology, data standards and operational strategies to respond to an increasingly complex security situation.

Second, with the growing importance of the Asia-Pacific region in global affairs, the EU and NATO are paying more attention to the region and participating more in regional affairs. The EU and many European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Lithuania have successively launched their "Indo-Pacific" strategies. The efforts of NATO to expand into the Asia-Pacific region have also become increasingly obvious. More importantly, the EU and NATO have strengthened coordination on their policy toward China. The two have expressed their common position on China in the form of an official document for the first time in Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation in 2023, which clearly regards China as a "challenge". The EU and NATO's strategic vigilance toward China is constantly increasing. This change is also in line with the new strategic thinking of the US on China, and also reflects the greater influence the US is exerting on the EU and NATO.

The growing interaction between the EU and NATO is

having an impact on China. First of all, the EU and NATO have been strengthening participation in security affairs of the Asia-Pacific region, which has intensified the complexity of the geopolitical environment for China. The increasingly frequent security interactions among the EU, NATO and some Asia-Pacific countries have shaped a tense situation in the region, which has also created obstacles for China's relations with neighboring countries and undermined regional cooperation.

Second, the series of actions of the EU and NATO in the field of security and defense may intensify the arms race in Europe. The long-term confrontation between Europe and Russia will greatly affect the political and security situation in the region, further exacerbating the security dilemma, which may increase the possibility of greater instability in Europe.

In fact, China and the EU share common interests, goals and visions. At present, in the context of the slow recovery of the world economy and the ongoing geopolitical conflicts, China-Europe relations are affected by some irrational factors. However, China and Europe are highly dependent on economic and trade cooperation and each is one of the most important trading partners of the other. Both sides recognize the other's importance. Although there is competition and frictions, both sides are striving to maintain dialogue. Since the beginning of 2024, leaders from the EU, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium and other European countries have made visits to China. China's top leader is also paying a visit to three European countries. The high-level interactions between China and European countries provide political guidance and momentum for the development of bilateral relations.

First, China should maintain strategic focus, sort out areas of disagreement with Europe and treat them according to their specifics. Both China and Europe uphold a stable attitude of active communication and dialogue, work together to properly manage their differences, and respect each other's concerns. China should encourage the EU and its member states to adhere to autonomy in their policies toward China. It should work with the EU to establish or improve the diplomatic and security dialogue mechanisms for managing differences and crises, and keep the

conversation open at all levels. Managing and resolving differences constructively, they will prevent the escalation of geopolitical confrontation.

Second, the role of economic and trade cooperation as the ballast and the propeller for China-Europe relations should be strengthened. The politicizing of economic and trade issues should be avoided. By joining hands to cope with global challenges, both sides can improve their bilateral relationship. China and Europe have extensive cooperation space in addressing global issues such as climate change, food security and public health threats, and both sides have a strong willingness to cooperate in these fields. China's strong manufacturing capabilities in the fields of the digital economy, clean energy and high-tech industries can provide important support for Europe's green transition. Enterprises from both sides can jointly explore third-party markets based on their respective advantages through cooperation.

Third, strengthening high-level communication as well as people-to-people exchanges between China and Europe can help to clear the misperceptions of China. On the one hand, strategic communication should be maintained through regular meetings of state leaders. At the same time, high-level officials from both sides should closely communicate and coordinate within multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and the G20, working together to uphold multilateralism and improve global governance. On the other hand, the public opinion foundation for China-Europe cooperation should be consolidated by deepening cultural exchanges and increasing personnel exchanges. China can further simplify visa procedures, increase the number of international flights, and implement visa free policies for more European countries, providing more convenience for people from Europe and other countries.

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MARCOS CORDEIRO PIRES

Overproduction of excuses for protectionism

Established powers change the rules of the game when they are at a disadvantage, but China will know how to position itself against the hypocrisy of its competitors

In a modern economy, a company's productivity is a key determinant of its success. The higher the productivity, the lower the production costs, the greater the profit margins, and the lower the final price per unit. This is why an innovative company focuses on research, innovation, technology, quality, and product design to

enhance its competitiveness in a highly competitive environment. However, a company's competitiveness is not solely determined by its internal factors. It is also influenced by external factors, such as regulations, transport logistics, taxation, labeling, phytosanitary controls, and exchange rates. These exogenous factors can significantly impact a company's ability to compete in the global market.

Yet a company's survival is not solely dependent on its internal capabilities. It is also contingent on the fairness of the international trade environment. Unfortunately, international trade can be manipulated by actions that hinder fair competition. These actions include the imposition of economic sanctions, boycotts, blockades, manipulation of exchange rates, and baseless accusations that tarnish the reputation and suitability of companies. Such unfair trade practices can pose a significant threat to a company's survival, underscoring the need to address protectionism with the multilateral institutions.

This problem is not new. In 1986, Sony founder Akio Morita, in his book *Made in Japan*, lamented the consequences of the 1985 Plaza Agreement, when the United States forced the appreciation of the Japanese yen and the German mark to reduce the competitiveness of foreign industrial goods in the US market. According to Morita, currency exchange rates should represent the reserves of foreign currencies and also each country's industrial productivity. The more competitive an industrial sector, the lower its production cost per unit and the lower its price in international markets. However, this competitive advantage can be distorted when a partner is forced to overvalue its currency, making the product more expensive in the international market. Therefore, manipulating exchange rates leads to price distortions, harming competitors. In that case, the US government guaranteed its company's artificial competitiveness by raising the prices of imported high tech

goods from Japan, Germany, and other countries. This example serves as a stark reminder of the detrimental effects of protectionism on international trade and competitiveness.

Market and rule manipulation can also occur through extraterritorial laws, often issued by the US Department of Justice, such as sanctions imposed on foreign companies and governments. Not long ago, Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou was detained in Canada under an order issued by the US. Previously, Frederic Pierucci, the former director of French company Alstom, was arrested for allegedly violating US competition laws. This episode occurred when General Electric pushed to buy Alstom's electrical equipment division, but the French government resisted the transaction. The acquisition only took place after the release of the French executive. After his release from prison, Pierucci wrote the book *The American Trap: My Battle to Expose America's Secret Economic War Against the Rest of the World*, which reported several actions by the US Department of Justice against foreign companies to benefit US corporations.

In addition to Huawei, other Chinese companies are being sanctioned by the US for the most varying reasons, but behind all these measures is the attempt to block China's development. Recently, US authorities and the Western media defended protectionist policies under the cloak of "overcapacity" of production in China in several sectors, which could negatively affect industries in other countries. This issue was addressed during US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen's visit to China in early April. At that time, Yellen raised US concerns about China allegedly flooding global markets with electric vehicles, solar panels and other clean energy products, threatening US jobs.

The US administration's complaints, particularly about EVs and equipment for generating clean energy, need to be contextualized, as these Chinese sectors show exponential growth in their productivity year after year. The development of the clean energy (solar and wind) systems would be unimaginable without taking into account the quality, quantity and price of solar panels and rotors produced in China. Huge clean energy plants in Brazil would be unfeasible without China supplying this equipment.

Regarding the automobile industry, the competitiveness of Chinese companies is unquestionable. The country produced 30.16 million vehicles in 2023 and sold 30.09 million.

Exports comprise a small portion (16.3 percent) of output, while imports, consisting largely of luxury vehicles produced in Japan, Germany, Italy and the US, comprise approximately 3 percent. It is worth noting that China's car production represents the combined production of cars in the US, Japan, India and the Republic of Korea.

A large part of Chinese car production is hybrid and electric vehicles, whose quality, technology, and price advantage surpass established competitors. BYD has become the world's largest producer of electric and hybrid cars, surpassing Tesla. Automated tools and economies of scale in producing vehicles for the leading world market guarantee unbeatable competitiveness.

Another recurring argument from the US is that the advantage of Chinese EV companies is derived from government subsidies. These subsidies may have been given at the beginning of the industry's implementation and when innovative activities were riskier, but not now, when dozens of private companies are tightly competing for the market.

When studying world economic history, we see that several companies were established during the creation and development of a new productive sector, intensifying competition, increasing the supply of goods, and leading to a general price drop. But the moment the new technology stabilizes, a consolidation occurs in which only the fittest survive. This process occurs through mergers and acquisitions or the bankruptcy of less competitive companies. This phenomenon has already happened in personal computer production, with the development of internet providers or smartphones, and will occur in the hybrid and EV sector.

The current campaign to discredit Chinese vehicles and accuse the country of flooding the international market with cheap products is just an excuse to justify implementing protectionist measures and prevent fair competition. Established powers try to use their ability to change the rules of a game in which they are at a disadvantage. But China is a sovereign country and will know how to position itself against the hypocrisy of its competitors.

The author is a professor of international political economy at Sao Paulo State University in Brazil. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

WORLDUS



Two visitors take selfies with panda mascots at the Chinese embassy open house event in Washington DC on Saturday. The embassy opened its doors to more than 5,000 guests as part of the Around the World Embassy Tour, a featured event of the Passport DC program organized by Events DC. YIFAN XU / CHINA DAILY

Embracing China's beauty, charisma

'Refreshing Fujian' event draws 5,000 guests at Chinese embassy open house event in DC

By YIFAN XU in Washington
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East China's Fujian province was in the spotlight over the weekend at the Chinese embassy's open house.

"Refreshing Fujian: Starting Point of the Maritime Silk Road" was featured at the embassy as part of the Around the World Embassy Tour of Washington DC.

More than 200 guests attended a VIP session, and over 5,000 local residents visited on a rainy day. The visitors experienced Fujian's hospitality and beauty and embraced China's charisma.

Following a promotional film titled *The Mountains, Seas and Culture of Fujian*, Jing Quan, the minister of the Chinese embassy, said that Fujian's story is not only one of an open, enterprising and beautiful China but also one of China-US friendship.

He said that last November, President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden agreed at their summit in California that the two countries would jointly promote people-to-people exchanges and support greater interactions.

"At the open house today, you will see the best of Chinese culture, have a bite of Chinese delicacies and witness a developing China," Jing said. "I wish you all a most pleasant and unforgettable experience."

Jiang Erxiong, the vice-governor of Fujian, said that Fujian is "an amazing land of beauties and blessings" on China's southeast coast and "China's only province with its name symbolizing happiness and fortune". She detailed Fujian's geography, tourism resources, transportation and culinary culture. Jiang said that more than 100 years ago, American friends took refuge from the summer heat in Kuliang, a resort in Fuzhou.

Wei Dong, the mayor of Zhangzhou City in Fujian, said that more than 400 years ago, Chinese commodities such as porcelain and tea, were shipped from Zhangzhou's Yue Port to the United States and Europe.

Zhangzhou has increased its economic and trade cooperation and people-to-people exchanges with the US since the reform and opening-up. More than a decade ago, it established a sister city relationship with Honolulu, Hawaii. Approximately 30,000 people from Zhangzhou now reside in the US, where foods, home goods and guitars made in Zhangzhou are popular.

Artists from Fujian and Zhangzhou City presented cultural performances on the embassy stage. The opening dance, *Golden Drums*, combined big drums and parasols; the glove puppetry performance, *Daming Prefecture*, featured an

excerpt from *Water Margin*, one of China's most beloved classic novels; and Fujian folk songs included leaf-blowing and dance such as *Catching Butterflies While Picking Tea Leaves*. Performers concluded with *A Land of Blessings*, featuring folk music, dance and puppets.

Three visitors and their families won the grand prize of an all-inclusive, five-day trip to Zhangzhou City.

The guests in the VIP session included Scott Shaw, the deputy assistant secretary for China and Mongolia at the US Department of Commerce; Benjamin Sand, acting coordinator of the Office of China Coordination at the US State Department; Tyler Makepeace, deputy director of the Office of East Asia at the US Treasury Department; Zhang Wencai, managing director and World Bank Group chief administrative officer; Li Bo, deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund; and Kimberly Basset, secretary of the District of Columbia.

At the Fujian-themed culture and tourism booths, the guests steeped and tasted tea, learned to write Chinese characters, and tried floral headdresses and *hanfu* to experience the beauty and happiness of the ladies in Jingpu.

The guests also tasted refreshments from Fujian, such as maltose, *mazao*, red bean cakes and mung bean cakes and took photos with Wuyi Mountain as the background.

Guests also were treated to lion dances and drum performances and took photos with giant panda

puppets; visited a science and technology exhibition themed "45 Years of China-US Science and Technology Cooperation: Outcomes and Future Prospects", and watched the Tian-gong space station through virtual reality.

Visitors also viewed nearly 100 pieces of Chinese painting, calligraphy, Suzhou embroidery and porcelain. Some guests spent time in parent-child activities such as coloring and paper-cutting.

Snacks included spicy beef slices, Sichuan cold noodles, spring rolls stuffed with three delicacies, and walnut cookies.

Lola Tamar, a visitor and a volunteer for the Around the World Embassy Tour, told China Daily of the event: "I absolutely love it. From the welcoming ceremony with the dance of the dragons to seeing the pandas, as well as the different rooms that we had the opportunity to view, and all of the beautiful Chinese architecture."

She also that she had learned some Chinese words, "*Huangying lai Zhongguo* (Welcome to China)".

Mark O'Connor, 53, said that he had "a wonderful time. People were so friendly and so nice, and I've learned a lot. It's been very informative. It's my first time, and it's a beautiful embassy," he said.

"I just got my name in calligraphy and people here. I enjoyed the music and just having some jasmine tea," he said. "I would definitely recommend it. ... I've been to some other embassies, but this is the best."

China firm takes on US retail giants

Amazon, dollar stores challenged as Temu grabs increasing market share

By BELINDA ROBINSON
in New York
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Temu, the fastest-growing Chinese e-commerce platform in the United States, could be set to challenge US online shopping giant Amazon and dollar stores with discount prices.

The company, owned by PDD Holdings, has made headway in the e-commerce field since its launch in the US in September 2022. It now accounts for nearly 17 percent of market share in the discount store category, according to data analytics firm Earnest Analytics.

Its rock-bottom prices include \$10 shirts and running shoes for \$17.48 sold on a site that offers a gamelike experience and heavy discounts — somewhat unusual for US and international consumers.

George S. Yip, an emeritus professor at Imperial College London, and a distinguished visiting professor at Northeastern University in Boston, told China Daily: "Temu is a sister company to Pinduoduo. It's a very important platform. Its head office is in Boston, but it's essentially a Chinese company and uses Chinese approaches."

PDD Holdings appears to be using a similar growth strategy for Temu that it used to launch Pinduoduo in 2015 against rival Alibaba, the Chinese e-commerce giant. Pinduoduo offered low-priced groceries and household items.

It also featured a game arcade and discounts. After becoming successful, it raised advertising fees for merchants and bought higher-margin items.

Temu is already posing a threat to long-established US e-commerce platform Amazon, which has a 38 percent market share and has had a dominant share of the consumer market for years.

As a brand that's extremely familiar to customers in the US, Amazon has a few clear advantages. With Amazon Prime, customers can get next-day delivery.

Amazon is reportedly trying to offer even faster shipping on a wider range of items, as standard shipping on Temu can take six to 20 days and express four to nine days.

"Amazon, of course, has the advantage of its distribution system or its warehouses. So that's hard to beat," Yip said. "But in China, the managers (are very efficient)."

Temu, much like its rival Shein, is able to offer such low prices because it uses a network of manufacturers based in China and cuts out the middleman to get goods to shoppers in the US.

The packages that arrive are processed under the de minimis

trade rule — which allows any item under \$800 to enter the US duty-free.

Temu has an estimated 100,000 merchants based in China that sell goods on its platform, according to research firm Marketplace Pulse.

Temu's rise can also be traced to its aggressive advertising campaign. It was the fifth-largest advertiser in the fourth quarter of 2023, The Wall Street Journal reported.

That was a jump from 2022, when it ranked 67th in digital-ad spending during the same period, according to research firm Sensor Tower. Amazon was the top spender.

During the much-watched NFL Super Bowl in February, Temu had three prominent advertisements costing \$21 million, along with a reported \$15 million worth of discounts, Forbes reports.

Last year, the company spent \$1.7 billion on marketing. This year, the company is projected to spend \$3 billion, JPMorgan estimated.

But the advertising blitz drew the disdain of 11 Republican lawmakers, who wrote to the heads of CBS (which aired the Super Bowl) and its parent company, Paramount, asking them to ban Temu from buying ads — something that did not happen.

The website's inroads into the US market come as US shoppers battle the fallout of inflation and the rising cost of food and everyday items.

Global expansion

About 40 percent of all sales in the US between September 2022 and August 2023 came from households with an income of less than \$40,000 a year, market research firm YipitData found.

Chen Lei, PDD Holdings' chairman and co-chief executive, told analysts in March that it was important to remember amid Temu's global expansion that consumers want bargains.

Other US discount stores such as Dollar General, Dollar Tree and others are reportedly watching Temu's meteoric rise closely. Dollar General has a market share of 43 percent and Dollar Tree 28 percent.

Dollar Tree, which owns Family Dollar, announced on March 13 that it plans to close 1,000 stores, including 600 this year. The company, with its headquarters in Chesapeake, Virginia, has 16,774 discount chains in the US and Canada.

Amid a challenging retail landscape, Temu has more than 100 million users in the US and a presence in 48 countries. The app has been downloaded more than 130 million times worldwide.

IMF official cautions against global trade fragmentation

By HENG WEILI in New York
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An International Monetary Fund official said the global economy is becoming more fragmented along economic and national security lines and offered suggestions on how to address the situation.

In a speech to the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research on Tuesday, Gita Gopinath, IMF first deputy managing director, said "global economic ties are changing in ways we have not seen since the end of the Cold War".

"Countries are reevaluating their trading partners based on economic and national security concerns," she said. "Foreign direct investment flows are also being redirected along geopolitical lines. Some countries are reevaluating their heavy reliance on the dollar in their international transactions and reserve holdings."

Gopinath said that despite such trends, there are not yet clear signs of deglobalization at the aggregate level, and the ratio of goods trade to GDP has been roughly stable — fluctuating between 41 and 48 percent.

"But under the surface, there are increasing signs of fragmentation," she said. "Trade and investment flows are being redirected along geopolitical lines."

Gopinath said that China's share of US imports declined by 8 percentage points between 2017 and 2023, following a rise in trade tensions. The US share in China's exports dropped by about 4 percentage points, she said.

"Consider a world divided into three

blocs: a US-leaning bloc, a China-leaning bloc, and a bloc of nonaligned countries," Gopinath said.

She noted that the average weighted quarter-on-quarter trade growth between US-leaning countries and China-leaning countries between the second quarter of 2022 and the second quarter of 2023 was almost 5 percentage points lower than the average quarterly weighted trade growth during the first quarter from 2017-2022.

She asked why there has not been more impact of "decoupling between geopolitical rivals on global trade".

"This is because some trade and investment are being rerouted through third-party countries, partially offsetting the erosion of direct links between the US and China."

She said that the emergence of "connector" countries such as Mexico and Vietnam may have helped cushion the impact of direct trade decoupling between the US and China.

Gopinath said: "The path forward will depend on policymakers. They may accept such rerouting of trade and FDI (foreign direct investment) in order to preserve some of the gains of economic integration.

"Or they may continue to raise barriers for cross-border trade and investment, further breaking both direct and indirect links between politically distant countries."

She said trade fragmentation is much more costly now because "unlike the start of the Cold War when goods trade to GDP was 16 percent, now that ratio is 45 percent".

"Now we are in an environment of

growing protectionism with several countries turning inward," she said.

For the China bloc, the US dollar share of trade finance payments has declined since early 2022. At the same time, the renminbi share has more than doubled, from around 4 percent to 8 percent.

She said the share of RMB in all cross-border transactions of Chinese non-bank entities with foreign counterparts was "close to zero" 15 years ago but increased to around 50 percent in late 2023.

The dollar share has been on a declining trend, falling from around 80 percent in 2010 to 50 percent in 2023, Gopinath said. "Trade is the main channel through which fragmentation could reshape the global economy. Imposing restrictions on trade would diminish the efficiency gains from specialization, limit economies of scale and reduce competition," she said.

While Gopinath said that estimates of fragmentation costs vary widely, "in an extreme trade fragmentation scenario with limited ability of economies to adjust, losses could be as high as 7 percent of global GDP".

"Fragmentation would also inhibit our efforts to address other global challenges that demand international cooperation," she said. "The ideal solution would be to preserve and strengthen the multilateral rules-based global trading system and the international monetary system." Gopinath said that would require a functional World Trade Organization (WTO) to settle disputes.

She offered three "pragmatic steps

to rebuild trust".

"The first step is to keep open the lines of communication and stay engaged. Dialogue between the US and China — which we are now seeing — can help prevent the worst outcomes from occurring," she said.

The second step is to work together on areas of common interest. She noted that more than 70 countries, through the WTO's Trade and Environmental Stability Structured Discussions, have identified ways to promote trade of renewable energy goods and services.

"We also see progress in services and digital trade. Policy restrictions are high in these fast-growing areas of the global economy," she said.

But 90 countries representing more than 90 percent of global trade are working together toward common digital trade rules, Gopinath noted.

"The third step is to limit harmful unilateral policy actions — including industrial policies. While it is appropriate to try to correct market failures through policy interventions, it must be carefully handled.

"History is replete with cautionary tales of policy mistakes, high fiscal costs and negative spillovers to other countries," she said. "Internationally, such policies have led to retaliation, which would deepen fragmentation."

Gopinath concluded that "it is critical to avoid the worst outcomes in a rapidly fragmenting world. It is well worth it to preserve some of the enormous gains from economic integration that have made the world more prosperous and more secure."

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LIFE



Baker Wang Fang has made cakes depicting 1,800 destinations, including (from left) Lingyin Temple from Hangzhou, Zhejiang province; a Pacific island; Sayram Lake from the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region; and the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

One might have a difficult time cutting into one of Wang Fang's cakes, as they are practically works of art, almost too good to be spoiled. From natural wonders to cultural heritage, the baker from Taizhou in Zhejiang province has re-created 1,800 destinations from China and around the world out of butter and flour. They are miniature presentations of scenery full of detail.

One of her most popular works is of the "world's loneliest house" in Iceland. Wang, in her 30s, did a fair job of re-creating the scenery at the destination, a bright green island surrounded by the sea, on which a tiny house with white walls and a dark roof sits.

"Everything is made from scratch," says Wang, who is known by her customers as Fanghao, and who has named her bakery Fangland Cake.

"The natural texture of rocks is achieved with chocolate, and the green color is made with matcha powder, while the ocean is pulled off by buttercream, with waves made from whipped cream," she explains.

Other classic creations include West Lake in Zhejiang's provincial capital Hangzhou, which highlights its pagodas and islands, and Yueya (Crescent Moon) Spring, the crescent-shaped lake surrounded by the Gobi Desert in Dunhuang, Gansu province.

"Most of our customers are between 20 and 30 years old. They love life and have a strong sense of ceremony," Wang says. "The cake itself may be secondary; what matters to them is its expression of emotion. Behind this, there may be a memory they cherish, or perhaps a place they desire to visit in the future. The quality of ingredients also matters to them."

She says that many of her customers generally regard traditional fondant cake as too sweet and heavy, so she has made a point of using soft chiffon cake layers and light whipped cream to make her cakes not just visually appealing, but also enjoyable to eat.

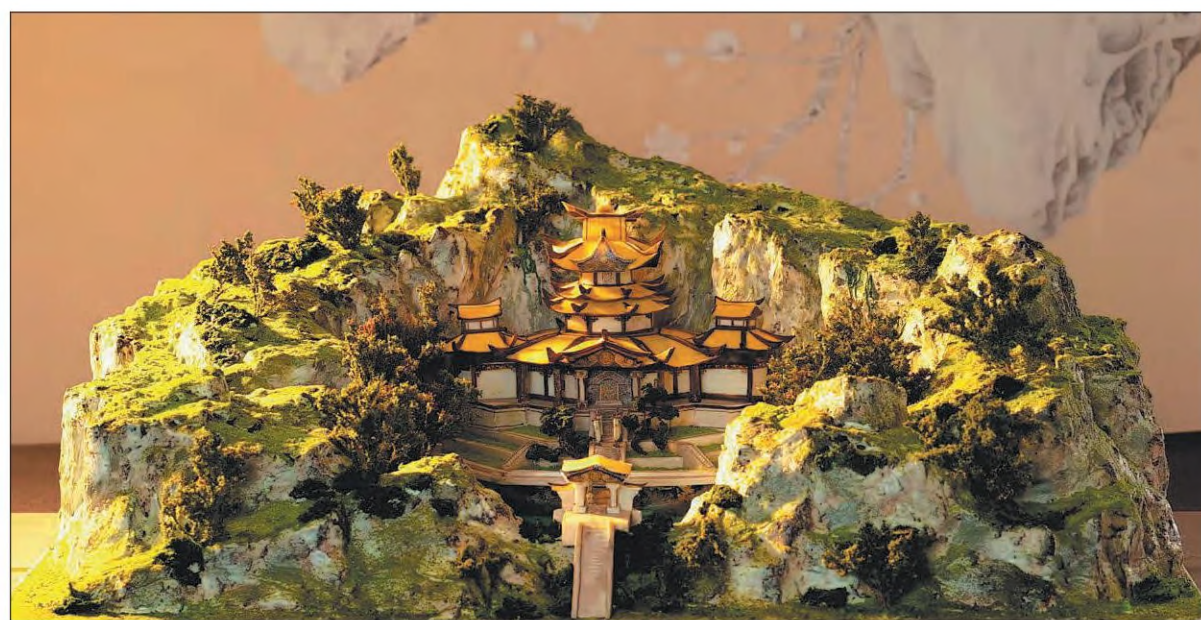
Micro-landscape cakes break away from the traditional round or square cake shape. A base is trimmed into a rough shape, and drizzled with chocolate ganache to give it initial form. Crumbled cookies are then used to create grass or snow, while green Sprite jelly is often used to fashion rivers, lakes and seas. Fine textures are well-crafted, and delicate fondant accessories are added layer by layer.

Wang got involved in the art as a result of special requests from colleagues at Alibaba, who constituted most of her clientele at the start of her baking career. She had been working at the Chinese technology company as a visual designer for four years. "I loved baking cakes in my spare time, and would share them with my colleagues, who were generous with their compliments," Wang recalls.

This encouragement kept her honing her skills and led to a sideline

Artistry on a plate is a piece of cake

Baker's ability to depict real-life scenes is a tasty treat, **Yang Feiyue** reports.



making cakes for colleagues. "It felt great whenever I delivered a cake to them," Wang says.

She says she enjoyed the instant feedback from customers and the satisfaction of pulling off a new design. "Sometimes, when customers had specific ideas and requests that I hadn't tried before, I got excited and was motivated to bring their vision to life," Wang adds.

As her experience grew, Wang discovered that baking was her true calling and quit her job in 2018. "I felt that I was just a cog in a big machine, and didn't play a big enough role in the outcome of a project," she explains.

Wang followed professional pastry chefs to learn the basics of shaping, piping, coloring, and fondant work before opening her dessert studio in Hangzhou.

Not content with traditional buttercream cakes, she began to make sculptural cakes that were shaped like cheongsam (traditional Chinese dress), clouds, wine barrels and skewers.

She was inspired to create micro-landscape cakes in 2022 when a former colleague sent her a photo of an island and asked if she could fashion it out of cake. After some trial and error, Wang succeeded



Top: A scene depicted in cake by Wang from the role-playing game, *Genshin Impact*. Above: Wang (third from left) explains the techniques involved in elaborate cake making to her students.

and then posted photos on the social media platform Xiaohongshu, earning herself more than 100,000 followers overnight. "I was so excited that I couldn't fall asleep," she says, adding that she then decided to make more cakes that looked like real-life destinations.

Wang began to pick up different skill sets. She had to explore everything on her own, as she failed to find anyone who was making micro-landscape cakes in China, she says.

For example, she considers the completion of a cake featuring rushing water cascading down Niagara

Falls and crashing against white ships downstream a technical breakthrough. "First, both the upper and lower flows of water are created with jelly, ensuring that the amount of liquid does not collapse the cake structure but still depicts the depth of the river," Wang explains. "Then, to capture the dynamic movement of the water, multiple layers of white buttercream are used, playing with light and shadow to create a sense of three-dimensionality."

Customers have since beaten a path to her business, which has expanded to have eight bakers and three customer service workers. "Most of my cake designers don't have a background in baking. Instead, they come from a variety of fields, including fashion design, environmental art, and fine arts, and only one has prior baking experience," Wang says. "What's crucial for me is they have a strong artistic foundation and a keen sense of aesthetics."

Her bakery receives about 20 orders a day. Prices range from 650 yuan (\$90) to 4,000 yuan, depending on size and complexity. "For the complex ones, we need four people working together, some doing the accessories while others are in

charge of the foundations, like mountains and land," Wang says.

Usually, a session is held for customers to express their ideas and for Wang to tell them what they can expect. After this, she does research to find more information on the destination.

"Sometimes, customers will only give us a photo showing parts of a place, so we need to find other angles to capture the entire scene, because most of us haven't been there," Wang says. "We also need to consider the customer's requests. For example, the photo might have been taken in the summer, but they may want a spring scene, with the appropriate colors and seasonal ambience."

One of Wang's most unforgettable experiences was re-creating an urban project for a 90-year-old woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease last year.

"She worked on the city renovation project decades ago. Her grandson found us and hoped to use the cake to jog her memory," Wang says, adding that she was touched that the woman had cried after recognizing the scene re-created in cake.

Previous design work experience has also lent Wang skills that can be applied to her customers.

"I offer them options when they only have a general idea of what they want, and explain the differences between the various choices," she says.

She currently has more than 600,000 followers on social media.

Liang Chen joined Wang's team in 2020. He had no prior experience but has since evolved into a professional micro-landscape baker.

"I used to sell handicrafts, but had been looking for novel things to try," says the 31-year-old, adding that Wang's cakes satisfied that quest for new experiences.

"Now we have increasing numbers of customers, who have posed an assortment of ideas to challenge us, and I feel a sense of achievement when we deliver what they've asked for," Liang says, adding that Wang has held nothing back when it comes to sharing her knowledge, and has always taken the initiative to learn new things.

Wang recently traveled to Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, to take a three-day course on creating cake flavors. "I'd like to add a wider range of flavors to my cakes," she says.

She's also planning to introduce smaller cakes that are cheaper and designed for daily consumption. "It would be a good way of allowing more people to enjoy the charm of our micro-landscape cakes," she says.

Now that business is on the right track, Wang feels that she is making money doing something she loves. "The key lies in following the heart, choosing to do what you love and enjoying the happiness that ensues," she says.

Contact the writer at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn

Villagers wrestle for 'sheep holder' honor as ancient test continues

TAIYUAN — After Li Yansheng won his sixth straight bout, the open-air arena erupted with thunderous applause and cheers, while the host's announcement heightened the atmosphere, "congratulations to our first 'sheep holder', Li Yansheng!"

This scene unfolded on April 17 during a competition, known as Village Wrestling, in Yuanping city in North China's Shanxi province. Nearly 10,000 spectators in the outdoor arena witnessed Li, from Beisanquan village in Yuanping city, defeat six opponents in a row to secure the title of the first "sheep holder" in this event.

This highly anticipated wrestling

match, also known as Naoyang (fighting for sheep) Wrestling, originated in the Xinzhou region and is usually held in village areas. Its unique feature is that participants are not restricted by gender or age. In this particular competition, the youngest contestant was a 13-year-old girl, while the oldest was a 60-year-old man.

The victorious wrestler, who has achieved six consecutive wins, is awarded the title of "sheep holder". Traditionally, the prize for such matches is usually a live sheep, and the winner proudly carries the sheep home, signifying victory and strength.

Naoyang Wrestling can be traced

back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). In ancient times, the Xinzhou region was situated on the border, and the border guards would engage in wrestling as a form of training and entertainment during their downtime from guarding the city. Over time, this tradition gradually spread and became a local entertainment sport.

"The rules of this competition are quite straightforward: Any part of the participants' body other than their feet touching the ground results in defeat," says Liu Mingyuan, the chairman of the Yuanping City Wrestling Association.

In 2008, Naoyang Wrestling was included in the national intangible

cultural heritage list, and the three areas of Yuanping city, Xinfu district, and Dingxiang county were also awarded the title of Hometown of Chinese Wrestling.

Like many others in Yuanping, Li grew up watching Naoyang Wrestling. The intense and thrilling wrestling moves fascinated him, and at the age of 7, he stepped onto the stage for his first competition.

"I had no experience during my first match and quickly had my head pressed to the ground by my opponent," Li says.

Influenced by the wrestling atmosphere in his hometown, Li embarked on a professional wrestling path. Through continuous

effort, he has now become a member of the Shanxi Provincial Wrestling Team.

Liu explains that the enthusiastic wrestling atmosphere in Yuanping has led many local youths to pursue professional wrestling careers, continuously supplying talent to both the provincial and national teams.

"Yuanping has contributed over 150 team members to the Shanxi provincial team, and wrestlers from Yuanping have represented the national team in 20-odd competitions," he says.

Naoyang Wrestling not only enjoys popularity among the people of Shanxi but also attracts participants and spectators from Beijing, Hebei

province and the Inner Mongolia autonomous region.

"Being at the scene was truly awe-inspiring. I never expected that China would have a grassroots wrestling competition with so many passionate wrestling fans, perhaps even more than some major wrestling events," says Zhang Wenyuan, a spectator from Beijing.

Liu says: "Naoyang Wrestling is deeply loved by people here. Meanwhile, our efforts are underway to refine the rules and format of the competition, allowing more people to better appreciate the joy that wrestling brings."

XINHUA

LIFE

CULTURAL JOURNEY

Journey to the West, by Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) writer Wu Cheng'en, follows the adventures of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) monk Xuanzang and his three disciples: the animal spirits Sun Wukong, or the Monkey King, Zhu Bajie, and Sha Wujing, on their journey to find Buddhist scriptures.

In 1966, when French composer Laurent Petitgirard received a copy of the novel for his 16th birthday from his elder brother, he was intrigued. He read the story over and over again, and began to think about turning it into music.

That didn't happen for more than 50 years, until Petitgirard met dancer-choreographer Wang Yabin in Paris in 2019.

On April 29, the composer was present in the theater of Beijing Dance Academy to witness the dance drama the two created together. Also titled *Journey to the West*, it is directed and choreographed by Wang, with a 74-minute score by Petitgirard.



I wanted to depict the journey of Xuanzang and his three companions in a poetic way, as well as imbue the music with the spiritual experience."

Laurent Petitgirard,
French composer

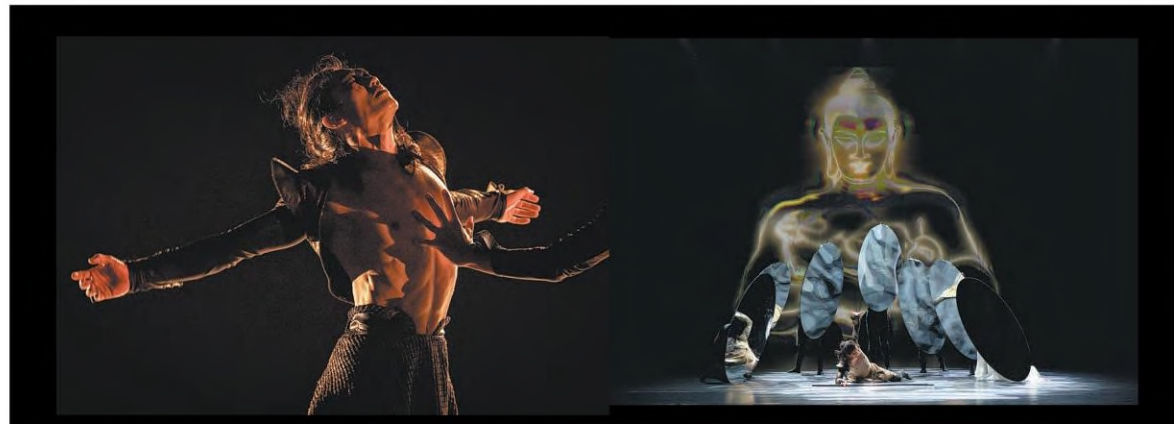
Between May 1 and 18, *Journey to the West* is doing a 20-performance tour of cities including Taiyuan, Shanxi province, Shenyang, Liaoning province, and Zhuhai, Guangdong province before being presented at the Theatre Marigny in Paris on May 21, as part of the program celebrating the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and France. In December, it will tour France, including performances in Biarritz, Arcachon and Cannes.

"For me, it's also a journey, from writing the music alone for three years to recording the music with 90 musicians from the Hungarian Symphony Orchestra Budapest in 2021, from having a number of online meetings with Wang and other creative team members, to meeting them in person in Beijing," says the 74-year-old, who was born in Paris and who studied piano and composition as a child. Petitgirard's work ranges from symphonic music, operas and chamber music, to film scores.

"I wanted to depict the journey of Xuanzang and his three companions in a poetic way, as well as imbue the music with the spiritual experience found in this great monument of Chinese literature," he adds.

He also invited artist friends to participate, with Eric Soyer taking charge of the stage set and lighting design, and Mathieu Sanchez of the multimedia technology.

The score was released by the



Top down: Scenes from the dance drama, *Journey to the West*, a collaboration between Chinese and French artists, is touring nationwide and will be staged in Paris on May 21. **Left:** (From left) Chinese scholar and translator Dong Qiang, dancer-choreographer Wang Yabin and French composer Laurent Petitgirard at Beijing Dance Academy on April 29. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

classical music label, Naxos, on April 28 last year, with a cover painting by monk and painter Shi Dachan titled *The Big Fight Against the Yellow-Robed Monster* that portrays a scene from *Journey to the West*.

The piece premiered in Tianjin, Wang's hometown, as well as in Beijing, as part of the 14th edition of the Yabin and Her Friends project last year. Afterward, Wang made revisions.

"I grew up reading *Journey to the West* and watching the cartoon and TV drama adaptations. Many Chinese are familiar with the story, but it really intrigued me to see how a foreign reader would interpret the story," says Wang, who trained as a dancer as a child and attended the Beijing Dance Academy, where she studied classical Chinese dance, ballet and contemporary dance.

The composer and choreographer worked together to tell the story, which begins with the monk Xuanzang embarking on his journey and setting Sun Wukong free from the mountain under which he has been trapped, and the ring of gold being placed on the Monkey King's head to control his rebellious nature.

It also shows how the other two disciples, Zhu Bajie, and Sha Wujing, join the journey and how Guanyin, the bodhisattva of mercy and compassion, helps Xuanzang and his companions survive the journey.

Wang also uses elements of martial arts and traditional Chinese opera in her choreography, such as when dancer Niu Dongyan, who plays Sun Wukong, performs with a wooden stick resembling the Monkey King's golden cudgel, or *jingubang*, a magic weapon that can change in size, making it small enough for him to keep in his ear, or as big as he needs it to be to defeat an enemy.

Since 2009, Wang has been inviting dancers from around the world to be part of Yabin and Her Friends, making international collaboration a driving force in her dance work. For example, she collaborated with Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui on *Genesis* in 2013, and with choreographer Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrich from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater on *Dream in Three Episodes*.

Wang attributes the collaboration with Petitgirard to Dong Qiang, a scholar and translator, who is dean of the Yenching Academy at Peking University and chair of the French department of its School of Foreign Languages. Dong introduced Wang to Petitgirard and served as the literary consultant on the project.

"When Petitgirard told me about his story with *Journey to the West*, and how he was fascinated with the novel, I was very touched. I immediately recommended Wang (Yabin) to him," says Dong.

"I've been building bridges between Chinese and French artists for decades. This collaboration, which has been ongoing through the challenge presented by the pandemic, is finally coming true."

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Popular science books are a formula for success

On Douyin, China's most popular video-sharing platform, a program dedicated to exploring essential science books has gained millions of views and attracted nearly 90,000 loyal viewers in just two years. Every week, esteemed scientists and scholars are invited to appear on the program to share their insight into books ranging from Euclid's *Elements* and Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, to Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*.

Program planner Wu Guosheng says that his goal is to ignite public interest in science and foster the participation of both scientists and the public.

"We do not encourage people to engage with classic science books for academic purposes, but rather to make the experience of reading about science captivating, enlightening and rewarding," says Wu, who is dean of the Department of the History of Science at Tsinghua University. He and his team have promoted nearly 100 classic texts on social media since 2022.

In the past, people preferred to read literary classics rather than scientific texts, and science books always received a lukewarm response. However today, China values sci-tech innovation, and there is growing enthusiasm for scientific literature.

According to data released by Beijing-based industry research company OpenBook, the science book market share has increased consistently since 2019. Despite an overall decline in book sales during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant surge in the popularity of books about medicine and health.

A similar trend is also evident among children's books, which account for the largest portion of the domestic book market. Since 2021, sales of science books for young readers have surpassed those of children's literature.

The upward trend is partly attributable to the fact that increasing numbers of experts are willing to share their knowledge through books, says Wang Dapeng, a member of the China Research Institute of Science Popularization.

Tan Xianjie, a 54-year-old gynecologist, is one such contributor. He has written a series of books and created short videos about women's health issues.

The doctor once received a thank-you flag from one woman at his hospital who was not his patient. After watching his lecture on cervical cancer, she booked an examination and after being diagnosed with early-stage cancer, underwent surgery.

The experience reminded Tan of



A young rider revs up at the 8th China Science Fiction Convention held in Beijing in April. Science related titles are attracting new fans, spurring growth in related businesses. ZHANG CHENLIN / XINHUA

the importance of popularizing science, which he says is "both a professional duty and a social responsibility for doctors."

When he began, the practice was not common among Chinese doctors. Hospital evaluation systems did not consider the popularization of science to be as important as the quality of surgery and patient numbers, and so the practice did not

contribute significantly to a doctor's professional reputation.

In 2016, national leaders recognized the importance of science popularization in a significant shift, describing scientific innovation and popularization as "the wings of the realization of innovation-driven development". Subsequently, government plans were implemented to underscore the necessity of

strengthening the writing of books about science.

The popularity of science literature is also being boosted by the country's rapid sci-tech development. Recent advancements in biomedicine, aerospace, astronomy, artificial intelligence and information technology have sparked waves of public enthusiasm for science, and have injected new vitality into the publication and marketing of science books, says Xu Guoqiang, deputy editor-in-chief at the Beijing World Publishing Company.

This year, the company is releasing a series of popular astronomy books that will cover topics such as the moon and Mars.

"The public needs books to have a better understanding of the country's cutting-edge scientific achievements," says Xu, citing examples such as China's successful launch of a Mars rover and future plans for manned lunar landings.

Xu says that the development of popular science and the reading of its associated publications relies on scientific literacy. The latest data shows that 14.1 percent of citizens were scientifically literate in 2023, and the country aims to raise that to 25 percent by 2035.

"Science popularization is a crucial means of enhancing scientific

literacy, and in turn, enhancement will contribute to the prosperity of popular science," Xu says.

Imported science books have long been competitive on the domestic market, with a typical example being Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, which has never left China's Top 10 list of popular science books since it was introduced here in 1992.

Well-known Chinese popular science books include the 1960s children's book series One Hundred Thousand Whys, the biographical *Goldbach Conjecture*, and the late-1970s science fiction book *Little Smarty Travels to the Future*. In recent years, books on genetics and quantum physics have also gained popularity with Chinese readers.

"But the problem we are facing now is there is still a shortage of Chinese science books, and a lack of books that spark readers' intelligence, curiosity and inner strength," Xu says.

Wang agrees and suggests more incentives to encourage professional participation, such as through funding projects.

"It may also be helpful to provide training to science writers to sharpen their writing skills," Wang adds.

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