



Lonesome riders

Chinese cyclists pedal across the world to explore cultures. **TREND, PAGE 8**



Powering industry

Photovoltaic project in Kubuqi desert transforms landscape **IMAGE, PAGE 7**

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A festival of lights



Visitors admire lanterns on display on Saturday at a lantern fair, which opened on Sunday at Beijing's Garden Expo Park. The event will run through Oct 31. YANG YI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Xi hails people power on NPC anniversary

Efforts to strengthen and improve democratic system in nation urged

By CAO YIN
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President Xi Jinping has said that China's democracy has enriched the theory and practice of democracy in the world, while urging constant efforts to uphold, improve and run the system of people's congresses effectively to develop whole-process people's democracy.

Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the statement on Saturday while delivering an important speech at a meeting to celebrate the 70th founding anniversary of the National People's Congress in Beijing.

The NPC is China's highest organ of State power. The inaugural session of the first NPC was held in September 1954. People exercise State power through the NPC, the country's top legislature, and local people's congresses at different levels, ensuring their interests and will are reflected in the decision-making process.

Xi said the establishment of this system marked a profound transformation in China's political landscape, signifying a shift from a system where the power was concentrated in the hands of a few while the majority faced oppression and exploitation, to one that empowers the people to govern the country as its masters.

See **Democracy**, page 2

Tariff hikes will hit US consumers, experts say

By ZHONG NAN
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The United States' latest move to raise tariffs on certain Chinese products threatens the stability of global supply chains and will ultimately pass the burden onto its consumers, market watchers and corporate executives said on Sunday.

The Office of the US Trade Representative announced on Friday that it has finalized tariff hikes on selected Chinese products following a four-year review aimed at "strengthening protections for strategic industries", despite opposition from multiple domestic sectors.

Business leaders and government officials said this will encounter industry opposition in the US, as finding substitutes for certain Chinese products in the short term will be challenging. Even if alternatives are found, they will come at a higher cost.

The US action not only severely disrupts international trade order but also fails to address the US' own trade deficit and industrial competitiveness issues.

These tariffs have raised the prices of imported goods in the US, and the costs will be ultimately

borne by US businesses and consumers, said a spokesperson from China's Ministry of Commerce on Saturday.

The final revisions announced by the USTR under the Section 301 investigation into Chinese products not only maintained the tariffs on imports from China, including electric vehicles, lithium batteries, photovoltaic cells, steel and aluminum, semiconductors and port cranes, but also further increased the tariff rates on medical gloves, needles and syringes.

"We are also disappointed that the USTR did not meaningfully broaden its tariff exclusion process," said Craig Allen, president of the US-China Business Council, headquartered in Washington.

Allen said the tariffs make it harder for US companies to compete in the US and abroad, cost American jobs, increase consumer prices and invite Chinese retaliation.

A spokesperson from the Beijing-headquartered China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, said the US unilateral measures will severely undermine the confidence in long-term stable cooperation between relevant industries in China and the US, and negatively

impact global industrial and supply chain cooperation.

Sharing similar views, Xu Deshun, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in Beijing, said that additional tariffs are protectionist activities, which is meant to hinder the development of China's emerging industries and products toward the mid- and high-end of the global value chains.

Stephan Buurma, a board member of Messe Frankfurt GmbH, Germany's largest trade fair and event organizer by sales revenue, underscored that as the growth of the global exhibition industry heavily relies on free trade and multilateralism, stable Sino-US and Sino-Europe economic and trade ties would benefit businesses on all sides.

"Despite external challenges, China remains a crucial market for global brands. Its vast consumer base, strategic importance in global supply chains and ongoing commitment to reform and innovation create significant opportunities," said Willie Tan, CEO of Skechers China, South Korea and Southeast Asia.

With over 3,500 stores in China, the US footwear brand plans

to continue market expansion in the coming years.

To cope with impacts caused by geopolitical tensions and the rise of protectionism, Ulrik Knudsen, deputy secretary-general of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, called on countries to ensure a fair global playing field for trade by maintaining open markets and a well-functioning, rules-based international trading system.

The US remains China's third-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade value reaching 3.15 trillion yuan (\$444 billion) in the first eight months of this year, up 4.4 percent year-on-year, accounting for 11 percent of China's total foreign trade value, according to statistics from the General Administration of Customs.

In another development, Chinese Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao met with Roberto Vavassori, president of the Italian Association of the Automotive Industry, in Turin, Italy on Saturday, the Commerce Ministry said in a statement.

The two sides exchanged views on topics including the European Union's anti-subsidy investigation into Chinese electric vehicles and China-Italy cooperation in the electric vehicle industry.

SMART LOGISTICS HELP CHINESE FIRMS STAY AHEAD OF CURVE

Overseas warehouses, supply networks enhancing delivery efficiency, reducing costs and improving user experience

By FAN FEIFEI
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At a warehouse in Bremen, Germany, more than 100 automatic guided vehicles, or AGVs, are sorting goods following precise instructions.

These AGVs are able to deal with thousands of stock-keeping units covering hundreds of categories at this "intelligent" warehouse, owned by Cainiao Group, the logistics arm of Chinese tech heavyweight Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.

Covering an area of more than 40,000 square meters, it stores an array of Chinese-made products such as household appliances, electronic devices, auto components, furniture and outdoor equipment.

The highly automated warehouse leverages cutting-edge digital technologies like 5G, artificial intelligence, the internet of things and big

data, as well as robotic arms.

This is aimed at increasing logistics efficiency, handling the surging number of parcels and overcoming manpower shortages during mega promotional campaigns.

Cainiao operates overseas warehouses covering more than 800,000 sq m across 18 countries and regions in Europe, Asia and North America.

Industry experts said the quick construction of overseas warehouses and global logistics networks is vital in enhancing delivery efficiency, reducing costs and improving user experience.

It is also useful in helping Chinese logistics companies expand their presence in overseas markets, ensuring the stability and security of supply chains, and meeting the growing demand for courier services from local consumers, they added.

See **Expansion**, page 3

Illegally anchored Philippine vessel withdraws

By CHENG SI
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China has successfully safeguarded its territorial sovereignty with the Philippines withdrawing its unlawfully anchored vessel from Xianbin Reef in the South China Sea on Saturday afternoon after a five-month illegal halt, and China will take countermeasures if Philippines continues its political provocations, said military experts.

The Philippine Coast Guard vessel No 9701 was illegally anchored near the Xianbin Reef since April 17, during which time China took several necessary measures to warn and control the vessel in accordance with the law, deterring several Philippine attempts to carry supplies to the vessel.

Liu Dejun, spokesman of the China Coast Guard, said on Sunday the

Philippines' move to illegally strand the vessel severely infringed on China's sovereignty and is a breach of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which was signed by China and the members of ASEAN in 2002, and damages regional peace and stability.

He said the Philippines should stop hyping the issue and infringing on China's sovereignty, and move in the same direction with China to protect the validity of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

He stressed that China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands, including Xianbin Reef, and the adjacent waters. The China Coast Guard will take necessary measures to firmly safeguard national territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.

Zhang Junshe, a former researcher at the Naval Research Academy, said that Philippines' attempts to transport supplies to its vessel during its illegal halt at Xianbin Reef under the garb of "humanitarian aid" was a lame excuse.

"It is the Philippines' largest and modern vessel on active service, which has been put into use in recent years, so 'humanitarian aid' is purely an excuse for its scheme of unlawfully anchoring near the reef and jostling with China for the reef," he said.

He added that Philippines tried to test China's resolve in safeguarding its territorial sovereignty by keeping the vessel stranded for such a long time. It was also hoping for a favorable response from the United States. "But China's mighty deterrence and the slim chance of

getting support from the US finally made Philippines leave in dismay."

He said the vessel's withdrawal proved that China's policies and measures for coping with South China Sea issues are appropriate. The nation always insists on handling disputes through peaceful means such as negotiations and talks, and it respects historical facts and behaves in accordance with international laws.

The military expert added that the possibility of Philippines continuing its political provocations in the future by sending another vessel to the South China Sea cannot be ruled out as it has played unreasonable and shameless tricks in the region in recent years.

"China will definitely take countermeasures to defend national territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests," he said.

Setting another milestone



A passenger (first from right) poses with crew members of a high-speed train in Guangzhou East Railway Station in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, on Saturday. The occasion marked the journey of the first train between Meizhou West and Longchuan West section of the 290-kilometer high-speed rail between Longyan in Fujian province and Longchuan in Guangdong. This also saw the country's railway network surpassing 160,000 km. See **story on Page 2**

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NATION

High-speed rail showcases prowess again

Milestone reached as railway network length crosses 160,000 kilometers

By LUO WANGSHU and LI PEIXUAN

China's railway network has achieved a major milestone as of Saturday, surpassing 160,000 kilometers of operational track, including over 46,000 km of high-speed rail, China State Railway Group, the national railway operator, has announced. This positioned China with the world's largest high-speed railway network and also one of the most advanced globally, the group said.

The latest addition to the network is a high-speed rail line linking Meizhou city with Longchuan county in southern China's Guangdong province. The 94-km railway, which began operations on Saturday, has contributed to reaching this new milestone in the railway network development.

Since the end of 2012, China's railway infrastructure has seen substantial growth. The total length of the railway network has increased by 64.2 percent, while high-speed rail has expanded by an impressive 392.2 percent.

This expansion has established China's rail infrastructure as world-class, excelling in passenger and freight transport, technological innovation, energy efficiency and safety.

Over a century ago, Sun Yat-sen, a pioneering Chinese revolutionary leader, envisioned a modernized China in his book *The International Development of China*. His plan included the construction of 1.6 million km of roads and approximately 160,000 km of railways. Today, while Sun's vision for railways has become a reality, the development of China's high-speed rail has exceeded his expectations.

Since the Beijing-Tianjin High-Speed Railway opened in 2008, China has built the world's most extensive and advanced high-speed rail network. Major projects, such as the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link and the Lhasa-Nyingchi Railway in Xizang autonomous region, have significantly

enhanced connectivity and regional development.

Li Jingwei, deputy head of the development and reform department of the group, highlighted the accelerated pace of construction. "Since 2012, the expansion of China's high-speed rail has intensified, with an average of over 3,000 kilometers of new high-speed rail lines put into operation annually," Li said.

The country's high-speed rail network has now accounted for more than 70 percent of the world's total high-speed rail. Of this, lines operating at speeds of 300-350 km/h covered 20,000 km (43 percent), while lines operating at 200-250 km/h covered 26,000 km (57 percent).

Notably, China is the only country to achieve commercial operation of high-speed rail at 350 km/h, showcasing its technological prowess, he said.

"From snowy forests in the northern part of China to the water towns in the eastern region, and from the desert to the sea, China's high-speed rail traverses major rivers, rugged mountains and connects all regions," Li said.

He also said that the high-speed railway network now covered 96 percent of cities with populations over 500,000, including the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

China's high-speed railway has played a crucial role in the country's economic and social development, reducing travel time and boosting industrial development along the routes, he said.

"The travel time between Beijing and Shanghai has been reduced from around 12 hours to just over 4 hours, while the journey from Beijing to Guangzhou (in Guangdong province) has been cut from about 21 hours to over 7 hours. This transformation has revolutionized the way Chinese people travel and many people have enjoyed traveling by bullet trains," Li said.

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Democracy: Xi urges putting people first

From page 1

He noted that the system of people's congresses is an important institutional vehicle for realizing whole-process people's democracy in China.

The system is conducive to safeguarding the people's exercise of democratic elections, consultations, decision-making, management, and supervision according to law, managing State affairs, economic and cultural undertakings, and social affairs through various means and forms in accordance with the law, he added.

Xi said that it has effectively overcome the phenomenon in some countries where the people have formal but not actual power, and where there are endless promises made during elections followed by no accountability afterwards.

Noting that democracy is a common value of humanity, Xi emphasized that the great achievements made by the Chinese people under the leadership of the CPC in developing people's democracy have contributed Chinese wisdom and solutions to global democracy.

Recalling the past 70 years, Xi said that the system of people's congresses has provided an important institutional guarantee for creating miracles of fast economic growth and long-term social stability.

He called for continuous efforts

to better uphold, improve and run the system to ensure the full and effective implementation of the Constitution, calling people's congresses at all levels to play their leading role in legislation, with more focus on key, emerging and foreign-related fields.

Efforts should also be increased by people's congresses in the oversight of both the Party and the country to ensure that all State organs exercise their power in accordance with the law and that the legitimate rights and interests of the people are safeguarded and realized, he said.

People's congresses should put the people first, maintaining close ties with the people and listening to their suggestions, he said, urging deputies to people's congresses, as the bridge between the people and the nation, to expand content and forms to connect with the people.

Huang Lixin, chairwoman of the Standing Committee of the Shanghai People's Congress, said: "Whole-process people's democracy has improved the quality of people's life and also promoted the megacity governance.

"While giving strong support to the renovation of old urban areas and the protection of elderly and children through legislation, we've also beautified the environment by rule of law, and established stations to help residents participate in lawmaking," she added.



Riding the wind

Volunteers fly large kites for a kite-flying show staged at a beachfront park in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, on Saturday.

LIANG XU/XINHUA

Nation honors rocket scientist posthumously

75 years on

By ZHAO LEI zhaolei@chinadaily.com.cn

Wang Yongzhi, one of the most renowned rocket scientists in China who played a leading role in the country's manned spaceflight endeavors, has been given the nation's top honor posthumously.

According to an order recently signed by President Xi Jinping, Wang, who passed away in Beijing at 91 in June, was among the four distinguished figures awarded with the Medal of the Republic, China's top honor.

Wang was the second scientist in China's space community to be given the Medal of the Republic, following Sun Jiadong, a top rocket and satellite researcher who was awarded in 2019.

Born into an impoverished farmer's family in Changtu county, Liaoning province, in November 1932, Wang was the fifth of seven children. At age 7, he became the first person in his family to attend school. He studied very hard and was deemed by his teacher as a truly gifted student.

Once he reached middle school, his studies were interrupted due to his family's inability to pay tuition fees as well as disruptions from the War of Liberation (1946-1949). Thanks to his class master's persuasion and help, Wang was able to complete his studies and achieved high marks.

During the years at school, the

young student witnessed the corruption of the Kuomintang government and the struggle for people's liberation and national independence that was led by the Communist Party of China, which eventually turned him a communist sympathizer and then a member of the CPC-led youth league.

In November 1949, right after the founding of the People's Republic, he joined the CPC at school.

Upon graduating from a middle school in Shenyang, capital of Liaoning, in 1952, Wang was admitted to Tsinghua University's aeronautics department to learn how to design combat aircraft.

One year later, Wang was selected to study in the former Soviet Union. He attended a Russian language training class at another university in Beijing before his departure.

In 1955, he arrived at the Moscow Aviation Institute to study aircraft design. However, two years later, Wang changed his major after learning that China needed some students to learn how to design carrier rockets and ballistic missiles.

In the summer of 1961, Wang graduated from the Moscow institute and returned to China.

He was assigned to the Ministry of National Defense's Fifth Academy — now known as the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology — to begin his career as a missile designer.

At the academy, Wang took part in the research and development of six types of ballistic missiles, including the DF-2, China's first domestically developed ballistic missile, and the DF-22, a long-range ballistic missile model whose development was later



Wang Yongzhi

abandoned. Most notable was his role as the deputy chief designer of the DF-5, China's first intercontinental nuclear-capable missile that remains one of the nation's strategic

deterrence pillars.

Wang also participated in the design of two carrier rocket models, laying the groundwork for China's future spacefaring ambitions.

In 1978, he was given a prominent position at the general design department of the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology.

He was named deputy head of the academy in 1980 and then became its president in 1986.

As president, the scientist guided the design and production work of new types of missiles and rockets and also played a leading role in Project 863, which was a national high-tech project launched in November 1986.

In 1991, Wang was promoted to deputy head of the former Ministry of Aerospace Industry's science and technology commission. There, he was the chief designer of a number of rockets and missiles.

The following year, he was named the first chief planner of the nation's manned space program, despite the fact that he was already 60.

In an interview with China Central Television, Wang recalled that he knew that the post would bring him a great deal of pressure.

However, he told the State broadcaster: "The project was to realize the Chinese nation's dream

of flying into heavens. So I must persist no matter how big the pressure could be."

In 1994, Wang was transferred to the former Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense and was given the military rank of major general. The move was made to better position him to head the manned space program.

He was also elected one of the founding academicians of the Chinese Academy of Engineering that year.

Under the scientist's leadership, the country succeeded in its first manned spaceflight in October 2003, established a robust research and manufacturing infrastructure for manned space programs and trained a large group of skilled spacecraft researchers and engineers.

For his valuable contributions to China's space program, Wang received the nation's top science and technology award in 2004.

In October 2005, he saw the success of China's second crewed spaceflight.

In 2007, Wang was relieved of his post of chief planner, but he did not retire and instead, was appointed head of planners for the nation's space station.

"What the motherland needs determines the direction of our efforts," he told CCTV in an interview. "The universe is infinite, and humanity's exploration is boundless. When you look back upon the past, what we've done might seem to be no big deal. The generations after ours will undertake new missions that will be more magnificent."

Typhoon Bebinca brings Shanghai to standstill

By ZHANG KUN in Shanghai zhangkun@chinadaily.com.cn

With railway services halted, festival events canceled and entertainment parks closed, Shanghai is gearing up for Typhoon Bebinca, which is expected to bring heavy rain and strong winds during the ongoing Mid-Autumn Festival holidays in the city.

The typhoon, the 13th to hit the country this year, was located about 435 kilometers to the southeast of Shanghai by 5 pm on Sunday. It will move westward and is expected to make landfall along the coastline from Zhoushan in Zhejiang province to Qidong in Jiangsu province on Monday morning, according to National Meteorological Center.

In response, the Shanghai Meteorological Administration has issued the level one emergency response which was the top among the four-tiered system on Sunday.

"I have stocked water and food that will last for about two days," said He Jingming, a woman who lives by the Dishui Lake in suburban Shanghai's Lingang area. "My friends consoled me and said there is hardly any chance of water or power outage, and I would be safe as long as I stay indoors with my windows closed."

Wu Rui, a meteorologist with



Fishing boats take shelter at the Shenjiamen port in Zhoushan, Zhejiang province, as Typhoon Bebinca approached on Saturday.

CHEN YONGJIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Shanghai Meteorologic Service, said: "There is an urban legend in Shanghai that said the city has natural barriers to typhoons. But that's not true, as we saw three typhoons striking Shanghai one after another in 2018."

According to Wang Qian, an expert with the National Meteorological Center, there is still uncertainty about the intensity and time of the landfall of Bebinca, but it is most likely to land between Zhejiang and Shanghai, with landing intensity of typhoon level or strong

typhoon level.

The Ministry of Water Resources on Saturday issued a Level-IV emergency response to flooding in Shanghai and the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui, warning that the water levels of some medium and minor rivers in the regions are projected to exceed warning thresholds.

China Railway Shanghai Group announced that some railway services in the region will be halted in order to ensure the safety of passengers and railway transportation. The

high-speed railways between Hangzhou in Zhejiang and Shenzhen in Guangdong province, between Hangzhou and Ningbo, the Jinshan Route and Pudong Route will remain closed from Sunday to Monday, while some railway services, such as between Hangzhou and Taizhou in Zhejiang and between Hangzhou and Nanchang in Jiangxi province, will be suspended on Monday.

Airports in Hangzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai have all had hundreds of flights canceled due to the impact of Bebinca. On Sunday evening the two airports in Shanghai, Hongqiao and Pudong, announced the decision to cancel all flights after 8 pm on Sunday. The Shanghai airports pledged to "release the flight adjustments concerning the two airports to the public in a timely manner", and passengers were advised to check with their airline companies for the latest flight status.

The 35th Shanghai Tourism Festival, which attracted more than 176,000 viewers on the opening parade on Saturday, announced that float parades planned on Sunday and Monday were canceled, while a shopping and tourism carnival event were postponed to next week.

Due to the impact of Bebinca, Shanghai Disneyland has been temporarily closed down from Sunday to Tuesday.

COVER

Expansion: Overseas warehouses play key role

From page 1

Cainiao has developed its global logistics infrastructure by expanding its overseas distribution centers to 18, as well as by establishing overseas warehouses, and self-operated distribution and pickup facilities.

Wan Lin, CEO of Cainiao, said the company will expand its footprint in Europe, North America and Southeast Asia, further improve its global delivery services and deepen logistics capabilities in key overseas markets as part of its go-global push. It will also look to establish more warehousing and distribution centers abroad.

Cainiao has said it would expand its five-workday delivery guarantee for AliExpress — the business-to-customer platform of Alibaba that sells consumer goods to overseas markets — to encompass several prominent European markets.

With the inclusion of Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom, Cainiao is enhancing the efficiency and reliability of cross-border e-commerce logistics in Europe.

This strategic expansion is in response to increased demand for faster and more reliable delivery services among European consumers, the company said.

By leveraging Cainiao's technology and extensive logistics network, AliExpress sellers in China can offer their customers in these markets a faster delivery experience within five working days.

"Europe remains a key focus for us as we continue to enhance our global logistics infrastructure and optimize delivery solutions for our customers," said Wan.

The expansion of the five-workday delivery solution to these additional European markets reflects Cainiao's commitment to providing faster and more efficient cross-border logistics services, he added.

Cainiao first unveiled such a delivery service in September 2023 in four European markets — Spain, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium. The service has since expanded to Germany, France and Portugal in close cooperation with local partners at every link of the logistics process.

Lu Zhenwang, CEO of Shanghai-based Wanqing Consultancy, said the move to invest in global logistics infrastructure and overseas warehouses will enhance the competitiveness of Chinese foreign trade enterprises, facilitate the development of the cross-border e-commerce sector and bolster sales of Chinese products overseas.

China's cross-border e-commerce industry has seen robust growth in recent years, with the sector's import and export scale reaching 1.22 trillion yuan (\$171.5 billion) in the first half of this year, up 10.5 percent year-on-year, data from the General Administration of Customs showed.

Industry insiders said cross-border e-commerce is key to boosting the development of China's foreign trade, while overseas warehouses, which usually apply AI-powered algorithms to schedule warehouse pick-ups and facilitate manual parcel sorting, have become a new type of foreign trade infrastructure to support cross-border



Top: An employee lifts cargo onto shelves at a warehouse in Csepel Freeport Logistics Park in Budapest, Hungary, in April. The warehouse is part of the park's Central European Trade and Logistics Cooperation Zone, which is a cooperative result of the Belt and Road Initiative. ZHANG FAN / XINHUA

Above: Employees arrange packages at a Chinese e-commerce company's warehouse in Mlolongo, Kenya, in November. LI YAHUI / XINHUA

e-commerce and expand the international market.

The development of overseas warehouses has been high on the government's agenda.

According to a guideline issued by the Ministry of Commerce and other government departments recently, China will advance the construction of overseas warehouses and expand cross-border e-commerce exports, so as to accelerate

the cultivation of new growth drivers for foreign trade.

Data from the Ministry of Commerce showed that the number of overseas warehouses has surpassed 2,500 so far, covering a total area of over 30 million sq m. More than 1,800 are specifically dedicated to serving the needs of cross-border e-commerce, with a combined area surpassing 22 million sq m.

Chinese online retailers are accelerating steps to enter overseas markets to seek new sources of revenue amid fierce competition in the domestic market, said Zhang Zhouping, a senior analyst of business-to-business and cross-border activities at the Internet Economy Institute.

"Overseas warehouses serve as vital infrastructures that boost growth in the nation's cross-border

“Overseas warehouses serve as vital infrastructure that boost growth in the nation's cross-border e-commerce sector.”

Zhang Zhouping, a senior analyst of business-to-business and cross-border activities at the Internet Economy Institute

e-commerce sector," Zhang said.

Such facilities enable quicker Customs clearance, faster delivery and lower costs, Zhang added.

By shipping goods in bulk to overseas warehouses, companies can better manage inventory, and quickly adjust logistics and distribution strategies based on market demand and changes in customer preferences, he said.

JD Logistics, an arm of Chinese e-commerce giant JD, is also accelerating the construction of global logistics infrastructure. It plans to build more overseas warehouses in the Americas, Europe, Southeast Asia, Australia and the Middle East, where Chinese enterprises are accelerating steps to expand their business volume with e-commerce penetration rates continuing to rise.

So far, the company has launched self-operated overseas warehouses in the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, the Netherlands, France, the UK, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Australia.

As of end-June, JD operated nearly 100 bonded warehouses, international direct-mail warehouses and

overseas warehouses, covering an aggregated floor area of about 1 million sq m.

Ji Jie, general manager of international warehousing and distribution at JD Logistics, said, "As key infrastructure in the new form of foreign trade, overseas warehouses can alleviate uncertainties in global supply chains and drive high-quality growth of foreign trade."

Ji underscored the importance of speeding up the construction of overseas warehouses in helping cross-border e-commerce platforms boost delivery efficiency, reduce logistics costs and improve user experience.

Chinese enterprises are facing mounting uncertainties, such as fluctuations in the shipping and air cargo market, Ji said.

Moreover, intelligent logistics technologies, ranging from automatic sorting robots to driverless vehicles, have been used in overseas warehouses to improve delivery efficiency and reduce operational costs, she added.

JD has also inked a strategic partnership with France-based Geopost, Europe's largest international parcel delivery network. This collaboration enables prompt local delivery from JD's overseas warehouses, with one-day delivery possible in countries such as Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, France, the UK and Spain.

To enhance cross-border delivery capabilities, Chinese logistics firms have also invested heavily in providing air cargo services. SF Airlines, the aviation branch of logistics giant SF Express, has expanded its freighter fleet to 87 aircraft.

SF Airlines said it is committed to continuously enhancing its international air cargo transport capacity and launching more routes.

China's first dedicated freight airport, Ezhou Huahu Airport in Ezhou, Hubei province, began operations in July 2022. SF Express holds a 46 percent stake in Hubei International Logistics Airport Co Ltd, the operator of Ezhou Huahu Airport.

To date, it has cultivated an international route network from Ezhou to destinations in Europe, North America, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia.

SF Airlines recently launched an international air cargo route linking Shenzhen, Guangdong province, and Sanya, Hainan province, with Singapore.

Goods meant for export collected from across the country will be sent to Singapore via this route. Subsequently, imported goods will be sent to Sanya, according to the cargo carrier.

Cargo aircraft operations are vital supplements to logistics companies' supply chains and delivery systems, as airfreight transportation can forge a greater synergy with warehousing and sorting centers to build an integrated logistics and delivery network, said Han Tao, a researcher at the China Air Transport Association.

Yang Daqing, deputy director of research at the China Federation of Logistics and Purchasing, said developing an international airfreight business will help enterprises boost long-haul freight capacity and further improve the efficiency of cross-border express delivery.

Consumers pull out all stops for high-quality, foreign brands

By FAN FEIFEI

Chinese consumers are increasingly demanding high-quality, foreign brands, fueled by efficient logistics and preferential policies including lower tariffs and an expanded list of imported goods, experts said.

According to a report released by market research company NielsenIQ and JD's cross-border e-commerce platform JD Worldwide, China's cross-border import e-commerce market grew from 444.1 billion yuan (\$62.4 billion) to 548.3 billion yuan from 2018 to 2023.

From 2017 to 2023, the number of users of China's cross-border import e-commerce platforms increased by nearly 20 percent annually, tripling in seven years and reaching 188 million in 2023.

As consumer trusts in cross-border e-commerce platforms continues to grow, so do consumption frequen-

cies and expenditures across diverse product categories.

Over the past year, 36 percent of consumers increased their spending on imported goods, while 35 percent bought a wider variety of imported products, the report said.

Notably, there has been a marked increase in purchases of beauty and personal care products, driven by rising awareness about self-care.

Consumers accord priority to quality while purchasing imported goods, as 56 percent cited quality as the reason for selecting international brands and overseas products.

In stark contrast to the initial phase of cross-border consumption, when consumers had limited access to overseas products such as infant formula and beauty products, today's cross-border e-commerce platforms have been able to supply diverse categories of products, it added.

Li Yanchuan, head of Amazon

China Global Store and Prime, said young Chinese consumers, especially Generation Z, think and judge independently while choosing brands, and prefer to pursue niche lifestyles and personalized products.

Chinese shoppers are increasingly favoring fragrance and skincare products, Japanese kitchenware, outdoor sports brands, virtual reality equipment, healthcare and nutritional goods, said Li.

Price, selection of products and logistics experience are the most important factors that consumers consider while buying imported commodities, Li said, adding that he is bullish on the prospects of China's cross-border online shopping market.

Orders for imported products mainly come from first-tier cities, but residents living in second- and third-tier cities have also demonstrated fast-growing purchasing

power. Amazon will further enrich cross-border shopping scenarios based on consumers who share similar interests and hobbies, Li added.

Amazon China Global Store announced in November the launch of its first inland bonded warehouse at the cross-border e-commerce comprehensive pilot area in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, to provide a more convenient delivery experience for Chinese consumers.

The warehouse is expected to save up to 10 days compared to direct international shipments, with the shortest delivery time being two days.

With the expansion of domestic demand and advances in emerging retail technologies, China has introduced preferential policies, such as lowering import taxes and expanding the range of permitted goods for import, said Zhang Tianbing, head of consumer products and retail industry at Deloitte Asia-Pacific.

The boom in celebrity livestreaming has helped spur cross-border e-commerce purchases by domestic consumers, while overseas brands are moving to cross-border e-commerce platforms to expand their distribution channels, Zhang added.

Data from JD's Consumption and Industry Development Research Institute showed that female users continue to be the primary shoppers for cross-border products, focusing on family needs and personal well-being. People aged between 26 and 35 account for about 50 percent of all cross-border imported product shoppers, the report said.

Chen Tao, an analyst with internet consultancy Analysys in Beijing, said the penetration rate of cross-border e-commerce in lower-tier cities and townships has risen in the past few years.

Chinese consumers are demonstrating rising demand for

diversified, personalized and niche products from abroad, Chen said.

Tapping into the consumption potential and upgrading channels as well as services in lower-tier cities and rural areas are key to fueling a recovery of consumption in China, he said.

Online shopping via livestreaming videos — an easy way for domestic consumers to find detailed information on overseas products — is gaining popularity among the post-1980s and post-1990s generation of consumers, he added.

Zhang Zhouping, a senior analyst on business-to-business and cross-border activities at the Internet Economy Institute, a domestic consultancy, said overseas brands should pay more attention to smaller cities, speed up digital transformation, as well as design and launch diverse products to better meet the varied demands of consumers.

WORLD

Cai explores fusion of art, science and artificial intelligence

By RENA LI in Los Angeles
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When art meets science, the result can be “explosive” and revolutionary.

That fusion lies at the heart of *Cai Guo-Qiang: A Material Odyssey*, an exhibition at the University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum (USC PAM) running from Sept 17, 2024, to June 2025.

The exhibition goes beyond the traditional gallery format, merging art with chemistry, physics and artificial intelligence to display the pioneering work of contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang, who uses gunpowder in his creations.

“Cai’s work is a masterful demonstration of how art and science can converge to create something entirely new,” Bethany Montagano, director of USC Museums, told reporters at a preview event on Friday.

“We are excited to host this transformative exhibition, which not only celebrates Cai’s innovative use of gunpowder but also highlights the important research and collaboration happening at the intersection of art, science and AI,” she said.

A Material Odyssey features a series of gunpowder test pieces produced by Cai for the Getty Research Institute to study.

Cai, 67, was born in Quanzhou, East China’s Fujian province, and trained in stage design at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in the early 1980s. From December 1986 to September 1995, he sojourned in Japan. Cai has resided and worked in New York since 1995.

Best known for his use of gunpowder in intricate paintings, drawings and large-scale pyrotechnic performances, Cai has spent decades pushing the boundaries of art by incorporating volatile materials into his creative process.

The materials have been central to Cai’s philosophy and creative practice, symbolizing both destruction and creation.

“I am often inspired by the calmness and the natural strength manifested in the works after the vibrant colors fade. Changes in the gunpowder bring about the uncontrollability and unpredictability, which is what makes gunpowder works so fascinating. The change itself is my work,” Cai said.

A Material Odyssey highlights something rarely seen in art

exhibitions: science as a tool for understanding artistic techniques. It presents imagery that delves into the molecular behavior of gunpowder and its evolution as an artistic medium in Cai’s hands, said Rachel Rivenc, lead curator and head of Conservation and Preservation at the Getty Research Institute.

“Cai has embraced the use of gunpowder because he wanted to relinquish control over the creation process. No matter how precisely a gunpowder drawing is planned, the results are still unpredictable,” said Rivenc.

“The awe-inspiring nature of Cai Guo-Qiang’s work embodies many of the values we hold dear at our museum,” said Rebecca Hall, USC PAM curator. “Cai’s gunpowder drawings and paintings, when presented alongside the museum’s permanent collection and housed in this historic building, remind us that as we push the boundaries of art and science, we remain deeply connected to the wisdom and creativity of the past.”

The event serves as a companion to Cai’s latest project, *WE ARE: Explosion Event* for PST ART, set to light up the skies above the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on Sept 15. Integrating AI-driven choreography with fireworks, drones and data science, the free daytime performance commissioned by Getty will launch PST ART’s new theme, *Art & Science Collide*, in spectacular fashion.

“Today, with the rapid rise of technologies like AI, culture and the arts often seem powerless. I hope *WE ARE* will serve as a monumental gesture of how the art world can merge the virtual and real in this new AI-driven era, while also standing as a strong voice and decisive action in these turbulent times,” said Cai, who has been researching AI since 2017.

The “explosion event” is anticipated to be the first large-scale daytime fireworks display in the US to incorporate drone formations equipped with pyrotechnic devices, according to Katherine Fleming, president and CEO of the J Paul Getty Trust.

“Cai’s work is explosive, expressive, and unmatched in scale. This performance, set to illuminate the skies of Los Angeles, underscores PST ART’s potential to engage a broad and diverse audience,” Fleming said in a press release.

Train tragedy



People gather at the scene of a train collision in Sharqiya Province, Egypt, on Saturday. At least three people were killed and 49 others injured in the accident involving two trains in the city of Zagazig, north of the Egyptian capital Cairo, according to Egypt’s Ministry of Health. AHMED GOMAA / XINHUA

African scholars hail FOCAC achievements

Platform bridges gap between Global South, major economies after 20 years

By EDITH MUTETHYA in Nairobi, Kenya
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As the dust settles after the 2024 Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, university scholars have hailed the platform for its transformative role in economic, political, and social development over the last two decades.

In a seminar held on Friday in Kenya’s capital Nairobi, co-organized by the Department of Diplomacy and International Studies at the University of Nairobi and the Africa Center for the Study of China, scholars said the platform has helped bridge the gap between the Global South and the major world economies.

Jack Odhiambo, the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Nairobi, said the tangible results of the partnership are visible across Africa, ranging from the roads, bridges, healthcare and education projects, to the capacity-building programs.

He lauded the FOCAC emphasis on people-to-people ties and educational exchanges, noting that the significance of education, research, and cultural diplomacy in fostering stronger ties between China and Africa cannot be overstated.

Through scholarships, training programs, research collaborations and cultural exchanges, he said thousands of African students and professionals have benefited from opportunities to study in China, and vice versa.

“These exchanges have enriched not only the lives of individuals but also strengthened our shared intellectual capital and cultural understanding,” he said.

“As we move forward, let us keep

in mind that the strength of our partnership lies not only in the infrastructure we build or the trade we conduct but also in the education and people-to-people relationships we foster and the shared knowledge we generate.”

Patrick Maluki, the chairman of the Department of Diplomacy and International Studies at the University of Nairobi, said programs such as the Confucius Institutes, have facilitated greater mutual understanding and collaboration.

“These programs have not only enhanced language and cultural education but have also strengthened academic and professional networks between our regions,” he said.

Maluki said the commitments on people-to-people exchanges made during the 2024 FOCAC summit, which was held from Sept 4-6 in Beijing, underscore the importance of academic collaboration and research partnerships.

“These initiatives are critical as they enable us to leverage academic expertise to address pressing global issues such as climate change, public health and technological advancement,” he said.

“The integration of the elements into our academic discourse enriches our understanding and contributes to the practical implementation of FOCAC’s objectives.”

Technological changes

Maluki said the evolving global landscape, characterized by rapid technological changes and shifting economic dynamics, necessitates a renewed focus on innovation, inclusivity and sustainability.

“It’s the role of the academic institutions to provide critical analysis, generate new knowledge, and propose innovative solutions

that can support and enhance the goals of FOCAC,” he said.

Margaret Hutchinson, the vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi, said China-Africa partnerships under the FOCAC framework have created a new model for international cooperation — one built on mutual respect, win-win outcomes and shared development goals.

“China has emerged as Africa’s largest trading partner, while African countries have found a reliable partner in China for sustainable development,” she said.

Hutchinson said the future of Sino-African relations under FOCAC is full of promise, noting that the commitments made at the recent summit, particularly in areas such as green development, digital economy, industrial cooperation and health, provide a blueprint for deeper and more strategic engagement.

Zhang Zhizhong, charge d’affaires of the Chinese embassy in Kenya, said many other countries have turned their attention to Africa, following the establishment of FOCAC in 2000.

“I’m proud and confident to say that China and Africa have developed the most successful model of cooperation for Global South, featuring its own valuable characteristics,” he said.

Since the establishment of FOCAC, he said, China has helped Africa to build and upgrade almost 100,000 kilometers of roads, more than 10,000 kilometers of railways, nearly 1,000 bridges and almost 100 ports.

Zhang added that Chinese companies have created more than 1.1 million jobs in Africa in the past three years.

He said China is ready to work with Africa to build a platform for governance experience sharing, a China-Africa knowledge network for development and 25 centers on China and Africa studies.

Thai minister urges positive trade links with China

By YANG WANLI in Bangkok
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A Thai minister called for a positive perception of its trade with China, emphasizing benefits from the two partners’ collaboration while urging relative sectors to strengthen laws to guarantee fair competition and safeguard consumers.

In a government policy statement on Friday, Commerce Minister Pichai Nariaphan noted that the new administration should make the best interests of the trade with the major markets — China and the United States in particular.

He reaffirmed Thailand’s neutral attitude and expectation of drawing more investment and opportunities. “Thailand should take advantage of the changing world and seek its own development,” he said.

In response to an increasing concern among Thai industry groups over the Chinese goods influx, Pichai expressed his confidence in the revival of the country’s economy and called for a rational and positive view on imports from China.

Last year, trade volume between China and Thailand reached \$126.3 billion, according to the statistics from the Chinese embassy in Thailand. At least 40 percent of agricultural products in Thailand were exported to China annually.

For the tourism sector, Thailand had welcomed more than 22 million foreign tourists by Aug 18 this year, bringing an income of nearly 1.06 trillion bahts (\$31.8 billion).

Sompop Manarungsan, president of the Panyapiwat Institute of Management, said the new government should address the perception that Chinese goods and investments are seen as negative by Thais before it escalates, Bangkok Post reported.

He suggested that collaboration between China and Thailand could build a win-win trade model. “If the perception and attitude toward Chinese trade and investment are not addressed promptly, the result would significantly impact Thailand’s export and tourism sectors,” he said.

After taking the role last month, Thailand’s new Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra confirmed the plan to deepen the close bond with China on social media platform X, saying that the friendship with China is based on “mutual trust and respect, a common vision toward prosperity and progress, as well as familial ties between our two countries’ peoples.”

Narongsak Puthapommongkol, president of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce suggested that Thais should look at its trade with China objectively. “China always opens its door to products from Thailand and welcomes the trade with mutual benefits,” he added.

Narongsak said China always supports the export of Thai products to the Chinese market through multiple channels and has invited Thai partners to participate in its major trade fairs for years. The Chinese government even provided free booths for Thai enterprises for 20 consecutive years for the China-ASEAN Expo.

Chinese enterprises in Thailand also help with employment in the country, he said, adding that the Thai-Chinese Rayong Industrial Zone helped boost Thai exports of \$3 billion last year and provided jobs for more than 55,000 Thai people.

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Second ‘attempted assassination’ of Trump thwarted

By HENG WEILI in New York
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Former US president Donald Trump was the target of “what appears to be an attempted assassination” Sunday afternoon at his golf club in West Palm Beach, Florida, the FBI said — nine weeks after the Republican presidential nominee survived a previous attempt on his life.

Trump sent an email to supporters saying that he was “safe and well.”

The suspect has been identified as Ryan Wesley Routh, 58, according to Fox News, which cited two law enforcement sources. He was arrested after fleeing in a vehicle.

Palm Beach County Sheriff Ric Bradshaw said Secret Service agents fired at the suspect, who was

pointing an AK-47 style rifle with a scope as Trump was on the golf course.

Bradshaw said the gunman also had two backpacks and a GoPro camera and that he was about 400 to 500 yards away, hiding in shrubbery — with the muzzle of the weapon visible — while Trump played on a nearby hole. The suspect dropped the weapon and fled in an SUV.

In the email Sunday, Trump said: “There were gunshots in my vicinity, but before rumors start spiraling out of control, I wanted you to hear this first: I AM SAFE AND WELL! Nothing will slow me down. I will NEVER SURRENDER!”

The golf course was partially closed for Trump as he played, and agents were a few holes ahead of him when they noticed a man with the

firearm, Bradshaw said.

Fox News host Sean Hannity said on the air that he spoke with Trump and the former president’s golf partner, Steve Witkoff, after the incident.

They told Hannity that they had been on the fifth hole and about to go to putt when they heard a “pop pop, pop pop.”

Within seconds, Secret Service agents “pounced on” Trump and “covered him,” Witkoff told Hannity.

Trump returned Sunday to his private Mar-a-Lago club, where he resides in neighboring Palm Beach.

Martin County Sheriff William Snyder said the suspect was apprehended within minutes of the FBI, Secret Service and Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office putting out an urgent alert.

Snyder said his deputies “immediately flooded” the northbound I-95

highway, covering each exit between the Palm Beach County line to the south and the St. Lucie County line to the north.

“One of my road-patrol units saw the vehicle, matched the tag and we set up on the vehicle,” Snyder said. “We pinched in on the car, got it safely stopped and got the driver in custody.”

Snyder told WPTV that the suspect “was not armed when we took him out of the car.”

The man had a calm, flat demeanor and showed little emotion when he was stopped by police, Snyder said, saying he did not question why he was being pulled over.

“He never asked, ‘What is this about?’ Obviously, law enforcement with long rifles, blue lights, a lot going on. He never questioned it,”

Snyder said.

The Martin County Sheriff’s Office indicated the suspect was apprehended near Palm City, Florida, about a 45-mile drive north of Trump’s golf course.

Trump returned to Florida this weekend after a West Coast campaign trip. His Sunday schedule had not been made public by the campaign. Trump often spends the morning golfing before having lunch at the club.

He has had increased security since the assassination attempt in July in Pennsylvania. When he has stayed at Trump Tower in New York, a line of dump trucks have been parked outside the building. At outdoor rallies now, he speaks behind bulletproof glass.

The White House said President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential nominee, were briefed and would be kept updated on the

investigation. The White House said the president was “relieved” that Trump is safe.

In a statement, Harris said she was “glad” Trump was safe, adding that “violence has no place in America.”

During a July 13 rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, Trump was fired upon, with a bullet grazing his ear.

The shooting forced Kimberly Cheatle to resign as Secret Service director under bipartisan pressure from Congress.

Corey Comperatore, 50, who was attending the rally, was fatally shot, and two other people in the audience were injured.

The gunman, identified as Thomas Crooks, 20, was shot and killed by a Secret Service sniper.

Trump is scheduled to speak about cryptocurrency Monday night on X about the launch of his sons’ crypto platform, from Mar-a-Lago.

Agencies contributed to this story.

PEOPLE

Faster by rail, the line linking China and Laos

By YANG RAN and LI HANMENG

For Keomorakoth Sidlakone, assistant to Laos' minister of industry and commerce, China is not only a friendly neighbor and essential economic partner, but also a country with which he has deep personal connections.

Sidlakone first visited China in 1970 at the age of six. "Between 1967-75, the United States invaded the Indochina Peninsula, and the Chinese government helped Lao revolutionary family members continue their education in Nanning in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. Around 2,000 children, including myself, went to live in China as US bombs were dropped in our country," said the now 60-year-old Sidlakone.

The school where they studied, Junior 67 School, opened in 1967 as the result of a joint decision by Laos and China. It later expanded to include kindergarten and primary school classes from grades one to six, and accommodated Lao teachers and students.

"I lived in Nanning for five years, from 1970 to 1975," Sidlakone said.

"At school, we studied in Lao, but the facilities and logistics were supported by the Chinese government. After graduating from the Junior 67 School, I returned home to continue my high school education. At present, the Guangxi Party Committee and local government are preserving the Junior 67 School as a provincial memorial."

Reflecting on this past, Sidlakone emphasized his deep connection with China.

"From my perspective, I feel that China is a very close and long-standing friend to Laos. I have never forgotten its support during difficult times," he said.

"The Chinese government supported Laos in many ways, not only in terms of economics but also education, agriculture and other fields. Many Lao students received scholarships to study in China, and when they returned, they brought valuable experience back to Laos. Many high-level officials in the Lao government were recipients of scholarships from China."

China and Laos share a strong and friendly relationship because of several key factors, including geographical proximity, historical ties and mutual economic interests, he said.

"Historically, the two nations have shared similar experiences and ideologies, particularly during periods of political transformation, fostering a sense of solidarity and understanding."

"Culturally, China and Laos are very close in terms of religion and food. Moreover, both China and Laos are renowned for their hospitality. Our border is not very long, only 500 kilometers, but the import and export of goods between the two nations has grown rapidly."

Last year, bilateral trade between China and Laos reached \$7.1 billion, marking a 26.6 percent increase year-on-year and setting a record, according to China's General Administration of Customs. From January to July this year, bilateral trade amounted to \$4.9 billion, up 30.3 percent on the previous year. Currently, China is the country's



Official's personal history sheds additional light on Beijing's increasingly vital role in regional development



Above: A Lane Xang electric multiple unit train of the China-Laos Railway in Vientiane on April 2.

Left: Chinese tourists take a photo near the Patuxai, or Victory Gate, in Vientiane on May 1.

Right: The Colorful Guizhou tourist train arrives in Vientiane Station on the China-Laos Railway on May 9.



For China, access to a growing Southeast Asian market and strategic regional positioning via Laos is beneficial to expanding its economic influence."

Keomorakoth Sidlakone, assistant to Laos' minister of industry and commerce



second-largest trading partner and its biggest source of investment.

Since 1999, Sidlakone has been working with the Supreme People's Prosecutor and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce of Laos, and has been contributing to the strengthening of Laos-China relations. He has been involved in committees related to the Laos-China Treaty on Extradition, the Agreement on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, and the Agreement on Cooperation in Criminal and Civil Law. He has fostered collaboration between the two countries in the business sector, particularly for small- and medium-sized companies.

Frequent interaction with China has allowed him to witness the country's development firsthand.

"Arguably, the most significant change in recent decades has been its economic transformation and global integration. China has achieved remarkable GDP growth and rapid industrial growth, lifting hundreds

of millions out of poverty," he said. "It has advanced in tech sectors, with significant investments in research and development."

He also highlighted the fact that economically, the country has been a major investor in Laos, contributing to infrastructure projects through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

The China-Laos Railway, a pivotal BRI project, has turned Laos from a landlocked country into a land-linked one, and into a crucial corridor for enhancing trade connections between Laos, China and other regional countries, Sidlakone said. The railway has significantly spurred local development by driving economic growth, boosting tourism and creating employment opportunities, he added.

From April 13 of last year to Aug 29 of this year, the line's international passenger train carried 1.14 million passengers, including tourists from 100 countries and regions, according

to data from its operator, the China Railway Kunming Group.

The number of cross-border freight trains has increased from an initial two per day to 14. The range of goods transported has expanded dramatically, from 10 categories — such as fertilizers and general mer-

chandise — to 2,900 categories, including electronics, photovoltaics and cold-chain fruits.

Since the China-Laos Railway began operations in December 2021, residents in areas along the line have been employed in freight handling, logistics, security and cleaning, indirectly generating tens of thousands of jobs, according to the group. Nearly 60 percent of the workforce involved in the railway's operation and maintenance are Lao nationals, many of whom are part of the first generation of railway technicians in the country.

"Investments from China have led to improved transportation, energy and communication networks in Laos, boosting economic development and creating job opportunities for the local populace," Sidlakone said. "For China, access to a growing Southeast Asian market and strategic regional positioning via Laos is beneficial to expanding its economic influence."

Laos serves as a crucial trade corri-

dor, facilitating the exchange of goods between China and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, he said.

"China and ASEAN have engaged in negotiations that resulted in numerous tax incentives and the removal of many policy barriers. This has greatly promoted import and export trade between China and ASEAN, as well as with Laos."

As Laos takes on the role of ASEAN's rotating chair this year, Sidlakone anticipates a deepening of cooperation between China and the regional bloc.

"Under Laos' chairmanship, cooperation between China and ASEAN is poised to deepen further. The collaborative dynamics are likely to enrich ASEAN's regional architecture and economic landscape, and will necessitate careful navigation of geopolitical challenges," he said.

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The entrance of the Taj Pavilion is decorated with Indian motifs. SHAO XINYING / CHINA DAILY

By SHAO XINYING
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When Mehresh Pastakia treats friends at his restaurant, the first thing he usually serves is Masala Chai, a traditional Indian beverage

The sweetness of food and love create a taste of home

made with tea, milk, spices and sugar. At his well-decorated restaurant, he follows this with lip-smacking food that delights the senses.

"I never imagined I'd settle in Beijing and love it so much," said Pastakia, who is in his 50s. "A Mumbai boy, turned Beijing local. This is what Chinese people call *yuanfen*, or destiny."

After Pastakia graduated in hotel management, he wanted to start his own business but luck was not on his side. One day, news arrived from thousands of kilometers away: an Indian restaurant in Beijing was looking to hire. It was 1991.

"Feeling the need for a fresh start, I wanted to give it a try. Imagine the distance that message traveled, particularly without fast communication channels," he said.

His seven years at the restaurant did not end in vain. Not only did he gain valuable experience, he also met his future wife, Zheng Xiaowen, who was working there as a part-time accountant.

Their frequent encounters eventually blossomed into love. However, dating someone from another culture proved to be more challenging than either of them had anticipated.

Pastakia recalled his first dinner at the plate when you are done eating, as this reflects the hosts' generosity and hospitality. Finishing all the food can suggest that not enough was prepared.

Beyond this initial misunderstanding, the couple faced many more challenges but managed to overcome them. This led to a happy marriage lasting more than 25 years, and they now have a son in his 20s.

Building on the strength of their partnership, the couple ventured out

and opened the Taj Pavilion restaurant in Beijing in 1998, a year after their marriage. They were hesitant at first, unsure if they could succeed, especially with the relatively small Indian and foreign communities in the city at the time.

"My wife is the backbone of my businesses. Without her, I wouldn't have succeeded," Pastakia said.

When he first opened the restaurant, his clientele was predominantly Indian. Now, he has noticed a significant shift, with Chinese patrons making up about half of his clientele.

"I'm happy to see Indian food gaining more acceptance. My restaurant has become a place where friends come to chat and gather," said Pastakia, who attributes his success to the team he leads.

Among the dishes on offer, butter chicken, which is simmered in a creamy tomato curry, is perhaps the most popular.

"We are meticulous about preparing the food and we try to best

serve our guests," said Anil Rawat, a manager at the restaurant. "Pastakia is a very good boss. We enjoy working with him very much."

During major Indian holidays, such as Diwali, the festival of lights, Pastakia sends out boxes of Indian sweets to friends and colleagues, as per tradition. "Sweets are given because they bring joy and happiness to loved ones. I want friends to have a sweet taste of Indian culture," he said.

Thanks to his dedication to serving authentic Indian food, the restaurant now caters to big companies and embassy events.

"It's an honor for me to have hosted both Indian and Chinese guests. I'm grateful for what I have for now," Pastakia said, adding they have received big names such as former Indian president Abdul Kalam, and former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

"When I was a humble hotel management graduate, I never



Chicken tikka, a north Indian dish, plated and ready to eat at the Taj Pavilion. SHAO XINYING / CHINA DAILY

expected to come this far and achieve what I have," he said.

"Whenever we see someone in need, we think of offering a helping hand."

"When society gives to you, it's natural to want to give back."

READ

By CHEN LIANG

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Adorning the walls of airport rail links and subway lines in Beijing are thousands of captivating photos. What many may not know is that over 1,000 of these images are credited to a single person: talented photographer Wang Wenyan, better known by her pen name, Qiubi.

Covering a range of subjects — from documentary work and awe-inspiring pictures of landscapes to snapshots of wildlife in Antarctica and images from the intriguing realm of astrophotography — her photos showcase her broad interests and remarkable versatility.

"I'm mainly a documentary and Antarctica photographer," Qiubi told China Daily. "Astrophotography is more like a hobby born from my childhood fantasies about the galaxy and cosmos."

Birth of a shutterbug

Born in 1987 in Nanming, Fujian province, Qiubi said that she got her first Canon compact camera, a gift from her father when she was in university. She received her first single-lens reflex camera when she started working for an automobile manufacturer's overseas marketing department in Xiamen, Fujian, after graduating from university in 2008.

She used it to take photos for the company's newsletters.

She worked with the company for four years, during which she met her future husband. They married and moved to Beijing. In order to further study in France, she attended a French training course at Beijing Foreign Studies University.

During a 2013 outing with friends in the capital, she discovered her passion for photography while capturing candid moments of her friends' children with her camera. Impressed by her photos, her friends said it seemed she had a knack for the art.

Their praise didn't surprise Qiubi, who had shown artistic prowess in her younger years. "I used to love and excel in painting during my school days," she said. "I even contemplated studying fine arts for a while."

Still, she was motivated by their encouragement and decided to make something of her gift.

The photos she took of the children led to her receiving her first commercial photography commission. More commissions followed, propelling her from a part-time to a full-time commercial photographer.

"My focus wasn't on typical commercial portraits but on capturing candid, documentary-style family moments," she said.

Her distinct style and artful approach began to attract more attention. In 2014, she received an invitation to document an international company's environmental project in a village nestled at the base of the Qilian Mountains in Gansu province. Immersing herself in the village life for a week, she trained her lens to capture images depicting how modern cooking stoves had transformed the villagers' traditional way of life.

Following the success of the project, she received more commissions from various entities, including corporations, nonprofit organizations and universities, all seeking her photographic expertise for their diverse projects.

These projects, ranging from environmental and biodiversity conservation and agricultural heritage protection to women's empowerment, climate change and sustainable community development, have brought her to remote communities in China and abroad, especially in areas inhabited by many of the country's ethnic groups.

Adventurous woman creates career behind camera

Qiubi finds her niche snapping shots of rural lives, polar excursions, starry nights



Clockwise from top: Tibetan children stand in front of a yak tent on the Jiatang Grassland in the Yushu Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Qinghai province. A penguin on Antarctica. A photo of the night sky above the poplar forest scenic area in Yiwu county, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. **Bottom:** A Tibetan woman walks on the Jiatang Grassland in Yushu. PHOTOS BY QIUBI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Understanding people

While working on these projects, Qiubi said she developed a passion for documenting the stories of grassroots communities and their residents. "One of the most challenging targets in photography is people," Qiubi said. "While working on my documentary projects, I often consider myself not just a photographer, but also a social worker."

When she approached her subjects, she preferred to keep her camera hidden in her bag initially. She would engage them in conversations, spend time getting to know them and partake in their daily lives before even thinking about taking a single photo. Her approach was to immerse herself in their stories before capturing them through her lens. "At first, I tried to build an emotional connection with my subjects," she said. "My gender has often been one of my advantages."

To complete a project, she once stayed in a village in the Garze Tibetan prefecture of Sichuan province for two months, accompanying villagers on their farm chores and making a pilgrimage to their sacred mountains. Sometimes she had to sleep in yak pens on alpine meadows.

Her experiences have deepened her understanding of the environ-

mental difficulties that rural people contend with, she said.

One particular trip etched deeply in Qiubi's memory was a journey to the Jiatang Grassland in the Yushu Tibetan autonomous prefecture in Qinghai province.

It was late spring when she found herself engulfed in a massive sandstorm while visiting the local herders. The fierce winds, laden with heavy sand and hail, shook her vehicle violently, causing her tripods to topple outside. As she struggled to retrieve her cameras, the wind became so intense that she found herself unable to return to the safety of her car, feeling as if she was stranded in a desert wasteland.

"It was a stark reminder of the negative impact of climate change and environmental degradation on the area," she said. "To me, it was just a singular experience, but for the nomadic herders there, it was probably a regular struggle."

Another experience that has had a lingering impact on her was her project at Wangjinhuang village

in Shexian county, Hebei province.

Nestled at the foot of the Taihang Mountains, the area faced severe droughts due to its rocky terrain and arid climate. To eke out a living in the harsh environment, the locals resorted to carving terraced fields out of the mountains. They upheld age-old traditions of seed preservation and sustainable farming practices, maintaining their traditional way of life for over seven centuries.

Documenting an agricultural heritage protection project conducted by a professor at China Agricultural University in Beijing, Qiubi made over 10 visits to the village over three years, witnessing firsthand the resilience and wisdom of the locals in harmonizing with nature.

"By planting different crops on their fields, the Wangjinhuang villagers have managed to protect 171 traditional varieties," Qiubi said.

Despite their adaptive practices, she said, the community faced unprecedented challenges in recent years. From severe droughts in 2019 to devastating floods in

2021 and plummeting crop yields due to prolonged cold spells in 2022, the villagers grappled with the harsh realities of climate change.

With her profound understanding of issues such as environmental conservation and climate change, Qiubi was invited to curate a photo exhibition during the first part of the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP 15) in Kunming, Yunnan province, in 2021, and share her insights during the second part of the conference in Montreal, Canada, in 2022.

Her photos depicting climate change adaptation were exhibited in Hong Kong last year, and that same year, she curated an exhibition on the topic for a charitable foundation in Beijing.

"I use my cameras and lenses to document various social issues, and through my curating, I expect more people to gain deeper insight into these issues," Qiubi said. "Sparkling people's awareness on some pressing social issues was a meaningful step toward inspiring tangible change."

She said that she has curated one or two photo exhibitions a year for the past several years.

Going down, looking up

In 2019, Qiubi was invited to go down to Antarctica for a commer-

cial shooting project. "I immediately fell in love with the continent," she said. "Everything is so beautiful — the landscapes, the wildlife, popular days and the night sky."

After returning to Beijing in November, she started looking for a convenient way to take photos of Antarctica freely. She soon decided to apply for jobs offered by some international polar exploration companies.

Qiubi sent her resume to a Danish expedition company, and in December 2019, she was hired to be its Antarctica photographer. The company can use the photos she takes while working for commercial purposes, and she serves as a photographic guide for the tourists visiting the continent via the company.

"I'm probably one of the very few Chinese women working on polar expeditions in Antarctica as a photographer," she said.

She has worked for the company every year since 2020. Each year, she makes multiple trips to the continent from October to February for the seasonal job, accompanying one tour group after another. "I spend one and a half or two months working in Antarctica," she said.

As the mother of a 7-year-old boy, Qiubi said she usually takes a break from her work to visit her family during Spring Festival.

"He is a very confident boy and has gotten used to my long absences from his life from time to time," she said of her son.

These days, she said she has video chats with him almost every day while working in Antarctica.

Qiubi said her coworkers have enriched her experience. "I've had the privilege of collaborating with colleagues from a variety of countries, many of whom are experts in various fields," she said. "Working with them has been a profound learning experience, broadening my perspective on the world and life itself."

Aside from her polar journeys, Qiubi has been looking up to the skies for photographic inspiration.

While traveling through Tacheng, Yunnan province, in 2014, she discovered a newfound passion for stargazing. Driving along a mountainous path, she was captivated by the breathtaking sight of the stars suspended in the night sky.

"It had been years since I last saw the galaxy," she said. "That night's spectacle transported me back to the starlit nights of my childhood when I lived at my grandparents' home in the countryside."

She began taking photos of the night sky, which has helped her reconnect with her childhood memories. "Astrophotography has evolved into more than just a hobby — it's become an obsession for me," she said. "It satisfies my insatiable curiosity about the unknown realms of the universe and fuels my imagination of advanced civilizations beyond our own."

Driven by this passion, she once dedicated six consecutive nights to capturing the celestial wonders in the wilderness of Yushu, Qinghai. Reflecting on that experience, she said, "I later learned that a Tibetan herder had been badly injured by a brown bear roaming the very area where I had immersed myself in capturing star photos."

The realization sent a shiver down her spine as she contemplated the proximity of such a formidable creature during her nocturnal photography sessions.

Qiubi reflected on how her numerous expeditions over the years have profoundly reshaped her outlook on the world.

"While working with a company, I used to be ambitious and focus on targets," she said. "However, through my photographic journeys, I have learned to embrace a more serene approach, finding joy in the journey itself rather than thinking solely on the end results."



IMAGE



A group photo of the staff of the photovoltaic desert control project, on June 26.



Construction staff members install photovoltaic panels, on June 24.



Photovoltaic project powering desert industry

Workers spread dry reed grass under photovoltaic panels to repair and solidify the sand, on June 26. PHOTOS BY MEI TAO / HUBEI DAILY



An aerial view of the 2 million kilowatt photovoltaic desert control project in the Kubuqi Desert, on June 24.

The Kubuqi desert, the seventh largest desert in China, is home to the Kubuqi photovoltaic desertification control project, which stands strong as a beacon of green construction.

The project has been carried out by PowerChina Hubei Group and adopted a new type of industrial model. Since its completion, the project can connect to the grid and generate electricity totaling around 4.1 billion kilowatt hours, and

reduce carbon dioxide emissions which can help build an ecological security barrier in the Northern region and guarantee ecological security.

Since its construction in 2021, the workers of the project have had to overcome many difficulties and made joint efforts to push forward its construction which has helped to promote the desert ecosystem management.

-China Daily



Workers weed the planted Chinese herbal medicine under the photovoltaic panels, on June 25.



A construction worker tightens a photovoltaic panel support, on June 26.



Staff members test the energy storage power station of the Kubuqi 2 million kilowatt photovoltaic desert control project, on June 24.

TREND

For Zhang Zhaoliang, who lives and breathes cycling, there is no better way to explore a country than by pedaling. Within 106 days, the 29-year-old man from Pingyao county, Jinzhong, North China's Shanxi province, has cycled more than 8,000 kilometers across seven countries in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

"For me, cycling is a way to discover the world, understand myself and find my purpose in life," Zhang says, adding that during his recent adventure, he has tried to know more about the history of Chinese migration and localization in Southeast Asia.

Preparing a kit that included a tent, a sleeping bag, a rain jacket and some clothes, Zhang set out from the China-Vietnam border port of Dongxing in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region on Jan 1 on his solo pedaling trip.

Cycling is becoming an increasingly popular way to travel in cities with a growing number of people swapping four wheels for two. However, a small group of people like Zhang do not stop at the city limits but decide to travel across countries by bike. On social media, many have shared their stories, indicating a thriving cycling culture taking hold.

For 38-year-old cycling vlogger Zhu Zhiwen from Ruijin, East China's Jiangxi province, his ultimate dream is to cycle across all seven continents. His latest adventure has been the super successful Olympic ride from Beijing to Paris, which took about 16 months, traversing 18 countries with a total distance surpassing 15,550 kilometers.

"Cycling is a part of life and after realizing my ultimate dream, my journey will continue, with more experiences to be gained, not only on two wheels," says Zhu, who has been hitting the road on his bike for the past 12 years.

Enjoying the freedom of cross-country tours on bikes, avid cyclists such as Zhu and Zhang discover an astounding diversity in landscape, people, culture, paths and experiences.

Back in the saddle

Like many people who dream to explore the world on a bike, which is the most environment-friendly and economical way to travel, Zhang is one of the few adventurers who has realized that dream.

When he was a junior at the Jilin Agricultural University in Northeast China's Jilin province in the late 2010s, Zhang embarked on his first long-distance bike trip across Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces.

After graduating in 2019, Zhang cycled 60,000 km on dirt and icy roads and pasture lands with sheer strength and determination across the country in three years, visiting about 80 percent of the country's prefecture-level cities.

"For me, riding is a personal challenge, which provides rewarding experiences, such as meeting people and getting to know different cultures," Zhang says.

Always wanting to hit the road and break out of routine life, he quit his job in Xiamen, East China's Fujian province, and started his bike journey on Jan 1.

Before that, he read lots of books and watched documentaries on the history and culture of Southeast Asian countries to prepare for his trip.

"I was intrigued by the history of Chinese migration to *nanyang* (south seas) between the 1850s and 1940s," Zhang says, adding that numerous people from southern China migrated to Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar. These countries are all very different, and yet, because they are in close geographical proximity, they have strong historical connections, he says.

With his navigation and translation apps installed in his smartphone, Zhang arrived at the northern Vietnamese city of Mong Cai through the Beilun River bridge.

With the familiar rural scene rolling past in Guangxi, Zhang felt relieved on the first day when people smiled and waved at him as he passed them on the bike. He chose to spend the first night in his tent in a field.

Looking into the long history of cultural influence and immigration between Vietnam and China, Zhang cycled from north to south to explore the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long in Hanoi, Ha Long Bay off the coast of northern Vietnam, the Complex of Hue Monuments lying along the Perfume River in Hue city, and Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, in southern Vietnam.

Pedaling cross-country to chase dreams

Cyclists hit the road to explore other cultures, meet new people and enrich their souls, report **Wang Qian** and **Zhu Xingxin** in Taiyuan.



Above: Cyclist Zhang Zhaoliang rides through the Kampong Kdei Bridge in February, which is one of the longest ancient bridges in Cambodia built during the Angkorian period from the 9th to the 15th centuries.

Left: Another cyclist, Zhu Zhiwen, during his 16-month Olympic ride from Beijing to Paris, passes the Buddhist remains of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in August 2023.

Below left: Zhu being interviewed about his bike adventure after arriving in Paris during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

Below right: Zhang's parked bike in front of a Chinese high school in Malaysia in April.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

his safety tips: Mind the motorcycle thieves in cities and keep your smartphone in the pocket.

From his 12-year nomadic lifestyle on his bike, the memory of being robbed is still fresh in Zhu's mind — which was en route from Egypt to Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.

"It was a scorching day and I felt exhausted after a long ride. I parked my bike under a tree for a rest. As I was taking out a bottle of water from my backpack, I was struck on my head from behind," Zhu recalls, adding that his smartphone fell and was taken away by the robber.

In excruciating pain and head bleeding, Zhu chased the man but lost him in a farm along the road. Staying in hospital for a week, Zhu recovered and continued his journey.

Zhu also got robbed in Pakistan and Iran and after these experiences, he learned to use nunchucks (weapon used in martial arts).

"Despite the dangers, I am happy that I chose this path. What's more important is that I never gave up but kept riding," Zhu says.

Answers on the way

For every rider, there is a reason to cycle. For Zhang, he likes to pedal to explore the uncertain and escape from everyday life.

Most of his peers find a 9-to-5 job and live a routine life, but Zhang yearns for something different. After his Southeast Asia sojourn, he took up a job in the real estate sector.

"When the opportunity comes, I will try other routes, like the Sino-Russian Tea Road and the ancient Silk Road," Zhang says.

The Sino-Russian Tea Road, stretching for 4,760 km, including 1,480 by water and 3,280 by land, once saw tea from Fujian province carried all the way to Mongolia and Russia, about 200 years ago. The Silk Road refers to a network of trade routes used by traders for more than 1,500 years, connecting China and the Far East with the Middle East and Europe, extending approximately 6,437 km across some of the world's most formidable landscapes.

For Zhang, it seems that once you hit the road, the journey to discover the world will never stop.

Zhu also feels the same, with cycling as a way to discover more unknown and interesting things which will, in turn, enrich his soul and his life in many ways.

Zhu's journey starts with his childhood dream that as long as the Earth is round, he can cycle around the planet.

"If you have a dream, just hit the road. When you keep exploring, all the anxiety, fear and hesitation will be gone with the wind. Then you can become who you want to be and pursue your dream," Zhu says.

Contact the writer at wangqian@chinadaily.com.cn

Though enjoying the beautiful scenery, Zhang says the weather should be borne in mind while cycling in Southeast Asia, as sweltering days are as common as sudden downpours.

One of the highlights of his Vietnam journey was visiting a temple in Nghi Loc, Nghe An province, to commemorate poet Wang Bo from the Tang Dynasty (618-907), who died, possibly from drowning, while visiting the region.

Wang is the poet traditionally grouped together with Luo Binwang, Lu Zhaolin and Yang Jiong as the "Four Paragons of the Early Tang."

"Wang was also from Shanxi, which ignited my interest in the poet and the land where he died," Zhang says, adding that it reminded him of Wang's verse, "*Hainei cun zhiji, tianya ruo bilin* (close friend in a distant land, far-flung realms as next door)".

Zhang spent about 10,000 yuan (\$1,410.23) in total on the trip.

Forging friendships

As a wonderful means to travel slowly, cycling provides a great way for riders to explore new lands, their food, history, landscapes and people

with an open mind and a little juice in the legs.

When Zhang recorded the stunning seascape at UNESCO-listed site Ha Long Bay in northeastern Vietnam's Gulf of Tonkin, in Quang Ninh province, a young man noticed Zhang and his bike. After coming to know about Zhang's plan to cycle across Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese said one day, he would also embark on a bike journey like Zhang.

At the Temple of Literature in Hanoi to worship Chinese philosopher Confucius, a local woman was happy to know that Zhang was from China and told him that she hoped to study in Shanghai next year. Her Chinese name is Yang Huiying.

In Cambodia, Zhang was invited to a local birthday party, an experience he cherishes, and many others that shaped his memories of other people's lives, lifestyles and livelihoods.

The friendships established during his adventure brought Zhang closer to local life and culture, which made him feel like being a part of the local community.

Zhu also has many such moments with people in his 12-year

bike journey. When he started his ride in South America in 2016, two foreigners fond of Chinese culture impressed him. One was the owner of a hostel in Ecuador, who had traveled to many places in China, conducted small business there, and had a great impression of the country. Even the pattern on the cups he used at home featured Chinese dragons, and he had a collection of some well-known varieties of Chinese liquor.

After cooking him an authentic Chinese meal, the owner waived his room fee for the night. In Zhu's mind, it reflected the ancient Chinese saying: "Treat others with courtesy, and they will respond in kind."

The other was an old man from Peru who was also a fan of Chinese cuisine. Although Peru has a lot of Chinese restaurants, the man was not satisfied and kept inviting Zhu to showcase his culinary skills at a family party. After spending two long hours in the kitchen, Zhu came out with delectable dishes, impressing everyone.

The man's son-in-law asked Zhu to teach him how to cook fish. Gesturing with hands and explaining cooking techniques in broken

English, Zhu got a thumbs-up from his host.

"It proves that food has no borders but serves as a good way to bring people together," Zhu says.

Challenges and dangers

Not always smooth, there are unexpected twists and turns on the road, especially during a solo trip, according to Zhang.

On the fourth day of his journey, two wheel spokes of Zhang's second-hand mountain bike broke due to the heavy load. After changing the spokes and servicing the vehicle at a local bike repairing shop for an hour, which cost about 15 yuan, Zhang hopped back on his bike, ready for his ride to Hanoi.

The next morning in Hanoi, Zhang found his bike, which was parked outside the hostel that he stayed in, was stolen.

Although Zhang called the police, he was frustrated and thought of giving up. On second thoughts, he found a bicycle store nearby and bought a new bike.

"For a riding enthusiast, a bike is more than a form of transport, it is a way of life," he explains.

Under Zhang's post on video-sharing platform Bilibili, Zhu left

BIZ LIFE



Sugar-free teas evolve into wellness waters, spawning big market

Industry report predicts annual sales in China exceeding 10 billion yuan by 2028

By WANG KEJU
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Sun Xu, 29, who works for an internet-based company in Beijing, is acutely aware of the pitfalls of regularly consuming not-so-healthy takeout food, but her hectic schedule, stiff deadlines and ever-increasing job responsibilities leave her with limited alternatives.

But change sprang in the air the moment she discovered the rising popularity of Chinese wellness waters. Priced 6 yuan (\$0.84) on average, each bottle of wellness water offers her solace, helping to offset some of the effects of fast food and encouraging her to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

But change sprang in the air the moment she discovered the rising popularity of Chinese wellness waters. Priced 6 yuan (\$0.84) on average, each bottle of wellness water offers her solace, helping to offset some of the effects of fast food and encouraging her to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

Sugary sodas and syrupy fruit juices no longer dominate Sun's fridge. In their place are a variety of Chinese wellness waters, each carefully selected for its unique health benefits, to provide her with a sense of well-being rooted in age-old practices and natural ingredients.

Red bean and coix seed water, renowned for its ability to alleviate dampness and swelling, is a particular favorite. Longan water, with its calming properties, provides a soothing balm for her busy mind. Tangerine peel water, which aids digestion, is another staple, helping to alleviate the stress that work often places on her stomach.

While the exact impact of these beverages on people's health may elude precise measurement, consumers' willingness to patronize such products underscores a broader shift toward prioritizing ingredients and formulations perceived as healthier, analysts said.

According to a report by the Qianzhan Industry Research Institute, the Chinese wellness water market has seen a staggering surge in 2023,

with full-year sales revenue reaching 450 million yuan, up over 350 percent year-on-year.

This is just the beginning, market observers said. The Qianzhan report predicted the compound annual growth rate will exceed 88 percent over the next five years. By 2028, sales are expected to exceed 10 billion yuan.

At their core, Chinese wellness waters represent an evolution of sugar-free teas, capitalizing on consumers' growing interest in health, wellness and natural products, said Zhu Keli, a researcher at the China Institute of New Economy.

As the competition in the sugar-free tea market intensifies, numerous brands are shifting their focus toward meeting consumer demand for healthier alternatives, giving rise to a new category of beverages that embody the essence of Chinese wellness, Zhu said.

Unlike traditional beverages, Chinese wellness waters do not have a strict definition. These products typically feature ingredients such as red beans, coix seeds, red dates and goji berries — centuries-old staples of Chinese cuisine and traditional medicine.

The surging popularity of Chinese wellness beverages has a direct bearing on a deep-seated cultural belief in the interconnectedness of food and health — a philosophy that has been integral to Chinese medicine for centuries, analysts said.

With a vast consumer base in China accustomed to incorporating these ingredients into their diets, their integration into beverages is meeting the growing demand for healthful, natural products that cater to consumers' wellness aspirations, said Zhu Danpeng, a Beijing-based food and drink sector analyst.



Top: Keyang wellness beverages are displayed during an expo in Shanghai in August 2023. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Above: Visitors take photos during a Chi Forest sales promotion event in Wuhan, Hubei province, in May. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

450 million yuan
sales revenue of the Chinese wellness water market in 2023

The Qianzhan report has also shed light on the primary reasons driving consumer purchases of Chinese wellness waters, with the top factors identified as weight loss and dampness removal, blood nourishment effects, sugar-free health benefits and clean ingredient lists.

These beverages offer a blend of flavors and wellness benefits that especially appeal to the needs of the younger generation who are tied to the high stress levels and fast-paced lifestyles, and hence crave health and balance in a simple and time-saving way, Zhu said.

According to a report by market

research firm iiMedia Research in June, over 90 percent of consumers are allocating more than 50 yuan per month to wellness tea beverages.

What was once a niche product category has now blossomed into a competitive arena, with brands engaging in fierce competition to capture the hearts, taste buds and wallets of the growing number of customers.

The inception of Chinese wellness waters can be traced back to the pioneering efforts of the Keyang Beverage Co, which first introduced red bean water in 2018. Despite being an early entrant into the market, the brand had faced lukewarm reception and feedback from distribution channels.

In mid-2022, a drink with a whole ginseng root soaking in every bottle, and simply called "The Whole Thing", set off a brief but intense

wave of excitement within the wellness beverage industry, triggering a surge in demand for this unique and health-focused drink.

Retailing at 19.9 yuan for a 480-milliliter bottle, it was produced by a small-sized enterprise in Wuhan, Hubei province. This innovative beverage quickly captured the imagination of more players to jump on the wellness water bandwagon.

The introduction of a diverse range of wellness waters by beverage brand Chi Forest last year impressed consumers and invigorated the market.

By May 2024, over 15 new brands had ventured into the Chinese wellness water market, signaling a surge in competition and innovation. Notably, Chi Forest has emerged as the front-runner in this competitive arena, commanding 58 percent of the market share, according to the Qianzhan report.

The development of the Chinese wellness water products was primarily inspired by Cantonese herbal tea, drawing on the rich tradition of medicinal beverages found across different regions, said Wang Xuegang, director of Chi Forest's research department.

With focus on promoting the benefits of staying hydrated with healthy water choices, the research and development team embarked on a journey to create a range of Chinese wellness water products that echoed the principles of traditional herbal tonics, Wang said.

The response from the market exceeded the expectations of the development team, with the first batch launched in February 2023 on e-commerce platform Tmall selling out within five days. This became one of the fastest-selling products within the brand's lineup,

surpassing the 100 million yuan mark in just four months since its launch, Wang said.

The growing popularity of Chinese wellness waters in the beverage industry reflects a broader trend toward health-conscious consumption, analysts said.

Traditional favorites like carbonated drinks have seen a decline in popularity as consumers increasingly prioritize health and wellness in their beverage choices. This shift has led to a dynamic rotation of growth hot spots within the market, with health-focused beverages and sugar-free options emerging as rapidly expanding segments, said Bai Wenxi, vice-chairman of the China Enterprise Capital Union.

According to Nielsen IQ data, the domestic beverage industry has maintained a steady growth rate of 6.5 percent in the first half of this year, with a continued restructuring of category dynamics.

Specific category growth trends reveal a shift in consumer preferences, with carbonated beverages experiencing a decline of 6.7 percent, functional beverages seeing a robust growth of 10.6 percent, and ready-to-go tea soaring by 19.5 percent.

The Chinese wellness water market holds vast potential for growth in the long term, offering a range of opportunities for brands and consumers alike, Bai said. He, however, cautioned about challenges stemming from the lack of a structured regulatory framework and a uniform set of industry standards.

The absence of clear guidelines, he said, has led to a competitive landscape characterized by inconsistencies in product quality, marketing practices and consumer information.

As milk vies with yogurt, dairy ferment gives consumers choices

By WANG KEJU

At Hongxing Qianjin Bread and Milk Company in Beijing, a glass bottle is delicately removed from a sterilizer, placed beneath the metallic spout on the bar counter, and with a gentle pull of the lever, fresh milk flows smoothly into the container.

Armed with a slice of toast imprinted with the production date, health-minded customers then proceed to the nostalgia-stirring stylish front desk to pay their bill, experiencing a sense of old State-owned enterprise charm.

Over the past two years, this rapidly emerging establishment has not only captivated a loyal following in Beijing, but also drawn in hordes of visitors from afar who make special trips on high-speed trains solely to partake of this unique experience.

However, the concept of pairing fresh milk with bread is not a novel one. Provinces like Zhejiang, Shandong and Hebei, and autonomous regions like Inner Mongolia, have

long embraced this practice, often referring to it as fresh milk bars.

With a focus on sourcing fresh milk from nearby farms, fresh milk bars are able to offer consumers a direct link to the origins of their dairy products, analysts said, stressing that this localized approach allows them to stand out in a crowded marketplace and capture a sizable share of the fresh milk consumption segment within their respective regions.

"We want to use this model where consumers can see the source of the milk and the processing method to assure them that domestic milk is reliable," said Li Dajiang, deputy general manager of Heli Dairy Co, which is located in Shandong province.

The current dairy consumption market in China is plagued by a contradictory dynamic — on the one hand, dairy farms are struggling to sell their high-quality raw milk at fair prices; on the other, consumers remain hesitant to purchase products they do not fully trust, Li said.

Recognizing this gap, Heli



Consumers line up for payment at an outlet of Hongxing Qianjin Bread and Milk Company in Beijing in August.
SONG JIARU / FOR CHINA DAILY

decided to leverage its advantageous milk sources and geographic location to directly supply local consumers with premium-quality and safe fresh milk products by harnessing the business model of fresh milk bars.

Consumers have shown a keen

interest in the visual experience of watching milk processing at the bars.

Twelve such fresh milk bars are now operational in Shandong's Weifang. The establishments cater to a burgeoning community of over 30,000 consumers, according to the company.

The dairy market in China has been characterized by a linear supply chain, where milk is acquired by dairy companies, processed, distributed through various channels, and eventually sold in supermarkets, said Li Shengli, a professor at China Agricultural University.

This conventional model, however, is marked by multiple distribution steps and extended transit times, which pose challenges to the production and consumption of fresh dairy products, Li said.

By sourcing fresh milk directly from their own dairy farms, fresh milk bars are able to offer consumers a truly local and affordable dairy experience. This proximity-based model not only ensures the freshness of the milk but also streamlines the supply chain, minimizing the number of intermediaries and reducing the time between production and consumption, Li said.

As the popularity of fresh milk bars continues to rise, the inadequacies in their product portfolios, industry chains and the lack of streamlined large-scale production

and marketing strategies are proving to be significant obstacles to their growth trajectory, analysts said.

These establishments are now facing a fresh wave of competition, particularly from the expanding network of outlets belonging to major ready-to-eat yogurt brands, said Wang Jiaqi, director of the Institute of Food and Nutrition Development, which is part of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs.

These brands, with a strong focus on product promotion and marketing, are swiftly establishing a formidable presence, potentially overshadowing the appeal of fresh milk bars, Wang said.

Moreover, the fresh milk bar model faces inherent challenges in its operations due to the perishable nature of its products. The requirement to process and sell the milk on the same day not only limits the production capacity of these bars but also makes it difficult for them to achieve scalable production, Wang said.

TRAVEL

By REN QI in Tbilisi, Georgia
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Where Europe and Asia meet, magical Georgia sits on the southern slope of the Greater Caucasus mountain range, whose snowcapped peaks run from the Black Sea to the Caspian.

The mountainous country is the queen of the Caucasus. For the past decade, it has slowly been making a reputation for itself among those in the know for its unique combination of ancient and modern attractions, natural beauty, and rich and proud cultural traditions.

Though relatively small in terms of area, Georgia offers a huge variety of scenery and activities. While there's no need to limit yourself to one region, you're best off deciding what kind of trip you want to have and then choosing a few parts of the country to focus on.

Rarely has such a small country appeared so enormous in scale upon arrival, with a glimpse of Europe's highest mountain range never far away and an almost limitless variety of landscapes that few countries five times the size could hope to rival.

Starting from the capital

Quickly beguiling anyone who visits, the Georgian capital offers up a fascinating Old Town, a wealth of avant-garde Soviet architecture, traditional sulfur baths and an array of medieval churches.

The capital city, Tbilisi, is straight from the pages of a Gothic fairy tale. A deep valley forms the backdrop to brightly colored turrets, cobblestone streets and a burgeoning art scene, while warm Georgian hospitality permeates the mix of contemporary and traditional restaurants serving up local favorites.

Spread out along the narrow valley of the Mtkvari River, Tbilisi is the kind of place you have to get up high to really appreciate — try taking the cable car to the Sololaki ridge where you'll find the Narikala Fortress and iconic Mother of Georgia.

You can also take the funicular to the city's highest point, Mount Mtatsminda, where, on top of stellar city views, you get a fairground and a huge Ferris wheel.

Old Tbilisi is a captivating labyrinth of winding streets, historic buildings and vibrant culture. Immerse yourself in the city's rich history as you explore ancient churches, traditional bathhouses, and architectural gems. Savor delicious Georgian cuisine, indulge in local wine and soak up the warm hospitality of the locals. It's a place where old-world charm seamlessly blends with modern-day energy, offering a truly unforgettable experience.

Tbilisi is also the best place in Georgia to eat out, with dozens of innovative menus available at establishments such as Barbarestan, Azarphesha, Ahubali and Keto & Kote.

This is also one of the best places in the country to sample a range of Georgia's famous wines and take part in its thumping nightlife. Tbilisi offers plenty to keep you entertained for days, but can also serve as a base from which to do day trips to various other parts of central Georgia.

Magic town

It is said that there's magic in the air in Sighnaghi and that's not just down to its high altitude and the views it has into the valley below. As a matter of fact, Sighnaghi is perhaps Georgia's single most attractive town, with an amazing position on a hilltop facing the snowcapped Caucasus looming across the vast Alazani valley.

The heart of Georgia's ancient viticulture lies in Sighnaghi. The town was originally built as a fortress that played a significant role in protecting the city from invasions. You can still see parts of the old defensive wall.

Sighnaghi Fortress played a crucial role in the defense of the region. The construction of the fortress began in the late 18th century during the reign of King Erekle II, who ruled



The Old Town of Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, and the Narikala Fortress welcome tourists in July. JIANG XU / FOR CHINA DAILY

Ancient mountainous nation offers a trip to cloud wine

Georgia's intoxicating blend of culture, history and beauty spots has something for every type of tourist



The 14th-century Tsminda Sameba Church in Stepantsminda has become almost a symbol of Georgia. REN QI / CHINA DAILY

the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti. He built a 4-kilometer defensive wall with several gates and towers to protect the city from attacks.

The fortress was strategically positioned on a hilltop, offering a vantage point to monitor the surrounding areas and act as a warning system.

Full of 18th- and 19th-century architecture and with a vaguely Tuscan feel, Sighnaghi has seen a comprehensive renovation program in recent years. It has also seen scores of hotels open as the local population reorients itself toward the tourist dollar.

The good news is that despite the tour groups and quad bikes, the town has retained its easy charm and is still a lovely place to spend a couple of days.



Visible for kilometers around on its hilltop overlooking Mtskheta from the east, Jvari Church is, to many Georgians, an icon. REN QI / CHINA DAILY

Seven things to know before visiting

- 1. Give yourself plenty of time**
Georgia appears small on a map, leading some first-time visitors to assume it can be seen in just a few days. But due to a combination of mountainous terrain and infrastructural shortcomings, that's not the case — travel times between regions are significant.
- 2. Pack clothes for all climates**
The summer can be stiflingly hot in the lowlands, but as soon as you reach any altitude, let alone the High Caucasus themselves, the temperature plummets and you'll need a fleece and jacket, even in July.
- 3. Be prepared for some rough roads if you're driving**
Georgia's roads have improved immeasurably in the past 20 years and the vast majority are now sealed, though they remain predominantly single-lane, frequently studded with potholes and lacking in markings or lighting at night.
- 4. Keep an eye out for sheepdogs**
Sheepdogs in the Caucasus are bred to be fierce and can potentially be dangerous, so give them a wide berth when hiking in the mountains and carry a stick if possible.
- 5. Take it easy on the chacha**
Georgia's far stronger version of grappa, *chacha* is the national drink and you'll almost certainly run into it during your visit.
- 6. Don't toast with beer**
Georgians only toast their enemies with beer, so make sure you have a glass of wine or *chacha* to hand if you're lucky enough to attend a traditional Georgian feast or dinner party.
- 7. In big cities, a small tip will be appreciated**
Hot on the heels of international tourism, tipping has now arrived in Georgia, though it's still limited to Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi for the most part.

REN QI

You can take a walk along the well-preserved city walls and visit the town museum, which has one of the best collections of paintings by Georgia's most famous artist, Niko Pirosmani.

Afterward, you can settle in at one of Sighnaghi's many wine bars to sample the results of the grape harvest in the country's premier wine-producing region.

Sighnaghi is also the city of love because of its wedding house where couples can get married at any time of day. As a result, it has become a popular destination for new couples.

Kakheti, the region surrounding Sighnaghi, is also renowned for its winemaking traditions. You can visit local wineries and indulge in wine-tasting sessions to savor the

flavors of Georgian wines. You can also learn about the winemaking process and the unique Qvevri method, which involves fermenting wine in large clay vessels buried underground.

The local market is one of the fun things to do in Sighnaghi. It is a great place to get a feeling of local life and buy some wine. It's sold in reused plastic soda bottles that look dodgy. Don't be fooled, because the quality is very good.

Iconic church

Stepantsminda is a small urban settlement located in the north of Georgia in Mtskheta-Mtianeti Province, directly at the foot of majestic Mount Kazbek. Until 2007, the town was called Kazbegi. It got this name in honor of the Georgian writer Alexander Kazbegi, a native of this land.

Stepantsminda is considered a popular bathing therapy resort. The famous Georgian Military Road, which connects Russia and Georgia, passes through the town.

The town is a base for some wonderful walking and mountain biking. What 20 years ago was just a big village has now grown into a sprawling town, with guesthouses and hotels everywhere and tourists arriving by the busload in the summer months.

While this may not have added to Stepantsminda's charm, the town's location remains stunning and it's still easy to escape the crowds and explore the surrounding mountains and valleys in peace.

As an iconic building, the silhouette of the hilltop church, Tsminda Sameba, against the glacier of Mount Kazbek is a sight that never ceases to amaze, despite its reproduction on a million postcards.

This 14th-century church 2,200 meters above sea level in Stepantsminda has become almost a symbol of Georgia. This is down to its photogenic setting, with the mighty Mount Kazbek rising behind it, and for the fierce determination involved in building it on such a lofty, isolated perch.

Tourists used to take a shuttle car to the church years ago and the price was not cheap. But now a circuitous new road leads up to the church that even a small car can complete without difficulty. However, you can still walk up to the church in one to two hours from town. As a reward, the views back over Stepantsminda are incredible.

Time for a visit

When to visit Georgia hinges on what type of trip you're planning. Most importantly, if you want to visit the mountains and do any serious hiking, then June, July and August are your best bets. That said, these three months can be uncomfortably hot in the lowlands, where Georgia's three main cities, Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi are found.

If you're after more urban pursuits and are keen to avoid the crowds and high season prices, then May and September are two outstanding months to travel.

Due to its location, nearly all visitors to Georgia arrive by plane and it's never been so easy to reach the country.

Tbilisi's modern airport boasts a dozen flights a day from major cities in Europe, as well as several daily connections to the Middle East and Asia. In contrast, the David the Builder Kutaisi International Airport near the centrally located city of Kutaisi has created a niche as the country's low-cost airline hub and is well-connected to other European airports.

Once you've arrived, you'll have to decide between making your way around the country by privately run minibuses known as *marshrutky*, which serve specific routes, or by self-driving a hire car, which is pricier, but offers you unparalleled freedom.

In Tbilisi, the two-line metro system is a good way to get around, while taxi apps are affordable.

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The cave city of Vardzia is both a cultural symbol and a natural phenomenon with a special place in Georgian hearts. REN QI / CHINA DAILY

SPORTS

PARALYMPICS



Monique Matthews (right) gestures to her teammates during the semifinals of the 2024 Paris Paralympics women's sitting volleyball competition on Sept 5. AP

Trading trauma for triumph

For some Paralympians, the journey from injury to sporting success is a short one

Some Paralympians live with a disability all their lives. Carson Clough is not one of those people.

Clough played lacrosse for North Carolina and knew nothing about the Paralympics until he was involved in a 2019 boating accident that required a below-the-knee amputation of his right leg.

He's one example of many among the 4,000-plus athletes at the 2024 Paris Paralympics who came to have a disability later in life, or only learned of the Paralympics when they were adults. For them, para sport has offered a new direction and sense of purpose to their lives.

In early 2022, with no previous knowledge of the sport, Clough was invited to apply to a talent ID camp hosted by USA Triathlon. It was there that he met his current coach, Mark Sortino, a long-time assistant coach for Team USA's Paralympic Triathlon team.

When he began training, Clough admits, jumping into an entirely new sport was a difficult process, and one that he made a lot harder on himself by thinking he knew more than he did.

"It was a case of thinking I knew a lot about the sport, and not doing much listening," Clough said.

"My coach, Mark Sortino, was obviously very experienced. He just kind of let me fall into my own trap and learn."

Monique Matthews' Paralympic career, meanwhile, began with a brochure.

Matthews had grown up a three-sport athlete, competing in softball, basketball and track throughout high school. Her plans at the time revolved around whether she should head to college for softball, or join the military.

While working a summer job at Circuit City, her plans went out the window when a warehouse accident cost Matthews her left foot.

After the incident, Matthews took a two-year hiatus from sports, unsure where her life would go from there. That was until, by chance, she discovered a way that she might be able to compete again.

"After my amputation, I was looking for a new prosthetist, and I was up in Oklahoma City, and they actually had a brochure for sitting volleyball at the Scott

Sabolich clinic I was visiting," said Matthews. "I e-mailed them and asked for a tryout, because I had never heard of the Paralympics before that."

She not only made the team, she's now got four Paralympic medals.

For Clough, after becoming more comfortable in the three aspects of triathlon, he quickly put his months of training to use.

In June 2022, he finished eighth at the World Triathlon Para Cup Besancon in France. This result set him up for a series of World Triathlon races that would eventually lead him to take first in the 2024 Americas Triathlon Para Championships in Miami in March, qualifying him for the Paralympics.

After this first intense run of competition, Clough centered his focus on putting in the work for Paris.

"For the past four months it's just been actually listening to everything (Sortino) says, because he, as well as my manager and all the coaches, they know what they're doing. I have no idea what I'm doing."

The result? Clough ended up medaling in his first ever Paralympic race, taking silver in the PTS4 class for athletes with affected

Carson Clough of the United States celebrates his silver medal in the 2024 Paris Paralympics men's individual triathlon PTS4 class on Sept 2. REUTERS



coordination on one side, or the absence of limbs.

As he enjoys this accomplishment, he's already looking ahead to future competitions, including the 2028 Paralympics in Los Angeles.

"You know everybody says, 'it never

gets easier, you only get faster,' but I'm gonna prove them wrong," he said "I'm gonna make it easier."

Like Clough, Matthews sees a message in their stories.

"A lot of times when you're injured, you just think you've got

to find a new path, you can't do athletics anymore," she said, "but then people see this, and they're like 'Wow, I can continue to grow even better as an athlete!'"

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Surfing is California's official state sport and Canadian para surfer Victoria Feige wants Los Angeles to prove it in 2028.

The five-time women's world champion is at the forefront of a lobby to get her sport included in the 2028 Paralympics.

LA's organizing committee has said it would not propose para surfing as a new sport for the event because of its "cost and complexity".

That dumbfounded Feige. California has hosted every world para surfing championship since the inaugural event in 2015.

"I was devastated," Feige said. "I have been hearing about the movement toward the Paralympics for para surfing since 2018."

"I won my first world title and I was urine-tested right after according to WADA anti-doping regulations. It felt important, progressive and we had this momentum."

There are nine para surf classifications encompassing missing limbs, prosthetics, paralysis and visual impairment.

The 39-year-old Feige competes in the women's kneeling classification. She mistimed a jump while snowboarding in Colorado at age 18, fractured vertebrae in her spine and was paralyzed below the waist.

"I have been so lucky and grateful to be able to surf again and find a community, to compete for my country and reach the highest levels, and push my sport forward in ways I never considered," Feige said. "While I am in still sort of the prime of my life, I would like to

Canadian hopes to turn the tide of opinion on para surfing at Los Angeles 2028



help my sport reach this global stage and I would love to compete and win the gold for Canada."

The International Surfing Association has turned its attention to Brisbane in 2022, but Feige isn't giving up on 2028.

A "Save Paralympic Surfing LA 2028" petition started by para surfer Josh Bogle has almost 27,000 signatures.

Feige has appeared in videos with surfing star Kelly Slater and musician Jack Johnson, who have



Surfing is California's official state sport and five-time women's world champion and Canadian para surfer Victoria Feige wants Los Angeles to prove it in 2028. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

endorsed para surfing for Paralympic inclusion.

She's planning a California outdoor wave pool event following November's world championship "as a proof of concept to show that para surfing can be held in LA in 2028," Feige said.

"It's like a football field and a big hydraulic press that creates a surfable wave on demand," Feige explained. "It's standardized and they've had surfing pro level competitions there before."

“While I am in still sort of the prime of my life, I would like to help my sport reach this global stage and I would love to compete and win the gold for Canada.”

Victoria Feige, para surfing world champion

"I'm wondering if it's an option to make it more cost-effective and logistically easy to incorporate it into the Games."

Canadian wheelchair rugby co-captain Trevor Hirschfield, who competed in his fifth Paralympics in Paris, gave para surfing a try in 2020 because he wanted an outdoor sport to pursue during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A year later, he was on a board at the world championship in Pismo Beach in California, in the prone 2 division, in which athletes require assistance to catch a wave and get on a board safely.

"I've been to Paralympics and world championships before, and I thought the world para surf championships were amazing," Hirschfield said.

"California — LA — hosting the Games and not picking up para surfing is a big miss on their part."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

SPORTS



Huang Xuemei and the 2024 Paris Olympics mascot at the Marathon Pour Tous. XINHUA

By XING WEN
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On the morning of Aug 10 in France, 32-year-old programmer Huang Xuemei, an amateur long-distance runner, stood near the finish line of the Paris 2024 Olympics marathon course, eager to witness the world's top distance runners as they completed the race.

"This was my first time seeing such incredible speed and passion in a marathon up close. It was truly overwhelming," she recalled.

"The finish line was within reach, and although exhausted, every runner dug deep to sprint the final hundred meters. I was moved by their determination," she added.

The enthusiastic cheers from the spectators lining the course also left a strong impression on her.

However, later that evening, when Huang became the first female runner to finish the 42.195-kilometer route in the public marathon at Paris 2024, she was so focused on her run that she didn't even notice her husband, Chen Zhiming, just a few meters away, cheering her on with shouts of "Come on, Xuemei!"

The Marathon Pour Tous (Marathon for All) event at Paris 2024 offered 20,024 amateur runners a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to follow in the freshly laid footsteps of their Olympic heroes.

They could run the same course where the world's top athletes had competed just hours before — a demanding route with steep climbs and quad-crushing downhill that make it one of the most challenging marathon courses in the history of the Games.

Huang completed the challenging route, which featured a total ascent of 436 meters, a descent of 438m, and a maximum hill gradient of 13.5 percent, in two hours, 41 minutes and three seconds.

Her personal best marathon time is 2:32:16, achieved at the 2023 Beijing Marathon last November. It was also the best performance by an amateur female runner in China.

Growing up in Zhaotong, in Southwest China's Yunnan province, Huang didn't discover her talent for long-distance running until she left her hometown to study computer science at Southeast University in Nanjing, Jiangsu province.

In 2011, during a 3,000m race at a school sports meet, her outstanding performance caught the attention of a coach.

RUNNING

LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP

Amateur runner swaps the rat race for the road



Every run leaves me feeling refreshed, as if the stress has been released, and I also feel a great sense of achievement."

Huang Xuemei, amateur long distance runner

Huang Xuemei and her husband Chen Zhiming pose after completing a race together. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Running has given Huang Xuemei more confidence. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

This marked the beginning of her journey into long-distance running, as she started training in her spare time and occasionally participated in competitions.

In 2015, she represented the university in a student marathon league held in Xiamen, Fujian province, where she completed her first full marathon with a time of 4:01:36.

After graduation, she became a programmer at Xiamen International Bank and settled in the city.

To relieve work-related stress, she resumed running as a way to unwind.

"Every run leaves me feeling refreshed, as if the stress has been released, and I also feel a great sense of achievement," she said.

She was also an active competitor in a local 5km night running league in Xiamen, noting that: "Training for 5km races helped improve my marathon performance."

Her competitive spirit drove her to continually pursue faster times. In the 2019 Beijing Marathon, she finished in 2:50:00.

"In 2020, I really wanted to run 5km in under 18 minutes, but I couldn't manage it. I felt I was plateauing, so I decided to join a running club to train and interact with others," she explained.

She joined a local running club in 2021, where she met her future partner, Chen.

One day, Huang offered a pair of new running shoes that didn't fit on the running club's WeChat group, asking if anyone needed them. Chen, who happened to wear the same size, and had just begun running, noticed the message and contacted Huang.

Their shared interest led to frequent running sessions together, and their relationship blossomed.

They soon became a couple and married earlier this year. Now, the pair run over 500km per month. Chen, whose marathon PB is 2:32:30, helps work out their training plans.

To prepare for the public marathon in Paris, they began training in May. Although Chen did not compete, he ran alongside Huang in the summer heat as her dedicated pace setter.

"We both keep each other accountable for our training plans. She has a remarkable quality of not giving up," Chen said.

When asked what running has taught them, they both emphasized the importance of persistence.

The couple insist that their shared passion for running has kept them going and continues to push them further than they could have imagined.

"It's incredibly rewarding," Huang said.



Huang Xuemei (fourth from left, front row) and her husband Chen Zhiming (third from left, front row) with members of the Black Horse Nike running club in Shanghai. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY