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# CHINA DAILY

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## Former US president Jimmy Carter dies at 100

By HENG WEILI in New York hengweili@chinadailyusa.com

Former US president Jimmy Carter, who established diplomatic relations with China in 1979, died on Sunday at the age of 100.

Carter, who served one term after his election in 1976, also saw his presidency defined negatively by the Iran hostage crisis in 1979 but positively by the Camp David peace accords. He lost his reelection bid to Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The center announced the death of Carter at his longtime home in Plains, Georgia, where he had been in hospice care for nearly two years.

Carter's wife, former first lady Rosalynn Carter, died in 2023 at the age of 96.

"To all of the young people in this nation and for anyone in search of what it means to live a life of purpose and meaning — the good life — study Jimmy Carter, a man of principle, faith, and humility," President Joe Biden said in a statement on Sunday.

President-elect Donald Trump said in a statement Sunday: "The challenges Jimmy faced as president came at a pivotal time for our country, and he did everything in his power to improve the lives of all Americans. For that, we owe him a debt of gratitude." "President Carter will be

remembered for his solidarity with the vulnerable, his abiding grace, and his unrelenting faith in the common good and our common humanity. His legacy as a peacemaker, human rights champion and humanitarian will endure," United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement.

A native of the small town of Plains, where he was a peanut farmer, Carter was known for his folksy ways and his later humanitarian efforts, such as Habit for Humanity, which built homes for needy people. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

The 39th US president, Carter was also the longest-living American president. He was a 1946 graduate of the US Naval Academy. In 1953, as a lieutenant, Carter was in charge of a crew that would work on the first nuclear submarine, the Nautilus.

The Carters established The Carter Center in Atlanta in 1982, which "seeks to prevent and resolve conflicts, enhance freedom and democracy, and improve health", its website says.

In January 2019, the center held a three-day event to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the normalization of US-China relations.

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Former President Jimmy Carter waves to the crowd at the Democratic National Convention 2008 at the Pepsi Center in Denver, Colorado, on August 25, 2008. Carter died at the age of 100 on Sunday. ROBYN BECK / AFP

## Joint actions define strategic depth of Beijing-Teheran ties

It is a matter of pride that, on the eve of Spring Festival, I have the opportunity to travel to Beijing for consultations with my dear friend, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The ancient Chinese poet Ye Yong beautifully described Spring Festival, saying: "The wind and frost of heaven and earth are gone and the atmosphere of the universe is harmonious. New Year is added to the calendar, and spring fills the old mountains and rivers." My trip to meet with my old friend comes after the successful meeting of our two presidents in Kazan, Russia, on the sidelines of the first official participation of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a full member of BRICS, at a significant and historic moment in global and regional developments, and when the path for pragmatic cooperation between the two countries has expanded through the consensus reached between our two leaders.

It has been almost five years since I last visited Beijing in 2019, when I came to participate in the

### WORLD WATCH

By Seyed Abbas Araghchi

"Iran-China Joint Consultation on the JCPOA". At that time, I had good discussions with our Chinese friends; we responsibly worked to encourage the other parties to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and adhere to their commitments. With a responsible and pragmatic approach, we demonstrated that nuclear issues are an inseparable part of the strategic cooperation between our two countries, and what makes an agreement lasting is "acting responsibly" and "adhering to commitments". It is emphasized that "when engaging with Iran as an important regional player, it must be done with respect, honor and on an equal footing".

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INSIDE Joining hands to promote regional integration Global Views, page 13

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Search and rescue operations are underway at Muan International Airport, in southwest South Korea, on Sunday, where a passenger plane burst into flames after belly-landing and skidding off the runway. It slammed into a concrete fence when its front landing gear apparently failed to deploy. The plane was carrying 181 people from Bangkok, Thailand. Two survivors were rescued, but all the other 179 people aboard the plane were confirmed dead. Bird strike is being examined as a possible reason for the accident. KIM HONG-JI / REUTERS

## Xi extends condolences over plane crash in South Korea

Deadly accident kills 179; two crew members survive

President Xi Jinping sent a message of condolence on Sunday to South Korean acting president Choi Sang-mok over a Jeju Air passenger plane crash, which killed 179 people.

Xi said he was shocked to learn about the tragedy that caused a significant loss of human lives. On behalf of the Chinese government and the Chinese people, he expressed deep condolences and extended sincere sympathies to the bereaved families, and wished the injured a speedy recovery.

The twin-engine Boeing 737-800, arriving from Bangkok, Thailand, with 175 passengers and six crew members on board, belly-landed and veered off the runway, bursting into flames as it plowed its way through a concrete wall at Muan International Airport, about 288 kilometers southwest of Seoul, shortly after 9 am.

The crash, which took place in Muan county, South Jeolla province, is the deadliest aviation accident ever on South Korean soil, and the third-most fatal by death toll involving a South Korean airline, Yonhap News Agency reported.

Domestic and international flight operations at Muan airport will stay suspended until Wednesday, the local news agency said.

In an emergency meeting on Sunday evening, Choi declared a national mourning period until midnight on Saturday. The acting president, who



Family members of passengers on the crashed plane weep at Muan International Airport on Sunday. KIM SOO-HYEON / REUTERS

visited the crash site, said the government was putting all its resources into dealing with the accident.

Joo Jong-wan, a senior South Korean Transport Ministry official, said that workers have retrieved the flight data and cockpit voice recorders of the plane's black box, which will be examined by government experts investigating the cause of the crash and fire.

Footage of the crash aired by South Korean television channels showed the plane skidding across the runway at high speed with its landing gear still closed, overrunning the buffer zone, and then colliding head-on with the wall, triggering an explosion.

Lee Jeong-hyeon, chief of the Muan fire station, told a televised briefing that the plane was completely destroyed, with only the tail assembly remaining recognizable among the wreckage.

Investigators are looking into various possible factors behind the crash, including bird strike and bad weather, Lee said. Yonhap cited airport authorities as saying a bird strike may have caused the landing gear to malfunction.

Of the 175 passengers on board, two were Thai nationals and the rest were all South Koreans, and they all died in the crash, according to local media reports. The youngest passenger was 3 years old and the eldest 78.

The two survivors were both crew members, a man and a woman, whose conditions health officials said were not life-threatening.

Jeju Air CEO Kim E-bae issued an apology and extended condolences to families who lost their loved ones. "Regardless of the cause, I take full responsibility as the CEO," he said.

Kim said the aircraft had no record

of accidents and there were no early signs of malfunction, adding that the airline will cooperate with investigators and make supporting the bereaved families its top priority.

Boeing said in an emailed statement: "We are in contact with Jeju Air regarding Flight 2216 and stand ready to support them. We extend our deepest condolences to the families who lost loved ones, and our thoughts remain with the passengers and crew."

The Jeju Air flight departed from Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport at 1:30 am and was scheduled to land in Muan at around 8:30 am. Kerati Kijmanawat, president of Airports of Thailand, said no abnormal conditions were reported during take-off.

A Thai government spokesman said that two Thai women, age 22 and 45, were on the plane, adding that more details about the passengers were being verified.

Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra expressed her condolences to the bereaved families and sympathies for the injured in a post on X. She said she had instructed the Thai Foreign Ministry to provide assistance.

The Muan crash is one of the deadliest disasters in South Korea's aviation history. The last time South Korea suffered a large-scale air disaster was in 1997, when a Korean Airline plane crashed in Guam, killing 228 people on board.

Yang Yilin and Zhao Jia in Beijing contributed to this story.

AGENCIES - XINHUA

## NATION HEADS CHARGE FOR AI COMPETITIVE EDGE

Domestic tech heavyweights competing with, overtaking industry's global leaders

By FAN FEIFEI fanfeifei@chinadaily.com.cn

As the latest tech frontier, the fast development of artificial intelligence is poised to play a pivotal role in driving China's industrial upgrade, experts and business leaders said.

Continuous technological advancements and increased application across a wide range of fields



are also expected to give fresh impetus to the country's high-quality economic growth. Multimodal AI-powered large language models, or LLMs, which can process and generate content across multiple modalities — including text, images, audio

and video — will lead further development of the AI industry, and bolster the revolution in industries such as computing power, servers and chips, they added.

Meanwhile, Chinese tech companies' investment in state-of-the-art AI technology, which all major economies are scrambling to establish a beachhead in, is experiencing a robust upward trend, with sustained growth pro-

jected in the coming years.

To gain a competitive edge in the global AI chatbot race, industry insiders said Chinese enterprises should put more resources into improving computing power and algorithms, accumulate more high-quality training data and ramp up investment in basic scientific research.

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## PAGE TWO

## Tech: Creating profound economic changes

From page 1

AI is forecast to contribute \$19.9 trillion to the global economy through 2030, and drive 3.5 percent of global GDP in 2030, according to a report released by global market research company International Data Corp.

In 2024, AI entered a phase of accelerated development and deployment, defined by widespread integration that has led to a surge in investments aimed at significantly optimizing operational costs and timelines, the report said.

By automating routine tasks and unlocking new efficiencies, AI will have profound economic consequences by reshaping industries, creating new markets, and altering the competitive landscape, it noted.

China's spending on AI will likely hit \$38 billion in 2027, and account for about 9 percent of the global market, with a compound annual growth rate of about 25 percent from 2023 to 2027, the consultancy estimated.

Zhong Zhenshan, vice-president of IDC China, said LLMs have a profound impact on China's technology sector. They not only spearhead scientific and technological innovation, but also promote industrial transformation and upgrading as well as development of the digital economy, Zhong said.

With the emergence of AI agent technology, the influence of LLMs will be further expanded, especially in the digital transformation of enterprises, improvement of the intelligence level of business processes, and work efficiency, he added.

AI agents are software programs designed to intelligently interact with their environment to achieve specific goals. They can learn and enhance performance through feedback by utilizing advanced algorithms and sensory inputs to execute tasks and engage with their environments.

## Major strides

China has made significant strides in developing AI technology. It is now home to more than one-third of the world's LLMs, according to a white paper released by the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology. The number of LLMs worldwide has reached 1,328, with 36 percent from China, the second-largest after the United States, which accounts for 44 percent of the total, it noted.

LLMs are AI models fed huge amounts of text data and are used in a variety of tasks, ranging from natural-language processing to machine translations. They involve key technologies underpinning US-based AI research firm OpenAI's ChatGPT, which has taken the world by storm since late 2022.

Major Chinese tech heavyweights — including Alibaba Group, Baidu, Tencent Holdings, and iFlytek — have stepped up efforts to roll out their own AI-powered LLMs and bolster the commercial application of generative AI technology.

Alibaba Cloud, the cloud computing unit of Alibaba, in September unveiled the latest version of its open-source Qwen 2.5 models, which boasts enhanced capabilities in math and coding.

This version is able to support over 29 languages, while catering to a wide array of AI applications across various sectors including automobile, gaming, and scientific research.

Wu Yongming, CEO of Alibaba Group, said LLM technologies have made rapid progress and currently can handle multimodal tasks including text, speech and vision. They can also understand requirements of humans and finish complex programming tasks. Meanwhile, the inference costs of LLMs have dropped exponentially, he added.

"We remain committed to investing in advanced AI infrastructure to foster the widespread adoption of generative AI technologies across different industries," said Zhou Jingren, chief technology officer of Alibaba Cloud Intelligence.

At present, more than 300,000 enterprises have access to Alibaba's LLMs, with a broad range of application in fields such as code programming, drug research and development, space exploration, and manufacturing.

The company has also announced an upgrade to its proprietary flagship model Qwen-Max, which has demonstrated strong performance in areas such as language comprehension, reasoning, math,



LIMIN / CHINA DAILY

and coding. Qwen-Max's capabilities are on par with those of OpenAI's most advanced GPT-4o model that was launched in May and caused a global sensation, the company said.

According to OpenAI, its GPT-4o model surpassed the company's existing models in vision and audio understanding, making the interaction between humans and machines much more natural and easier.

Baidu's AI-powered LLM Ernie Bot has garnered over 430 million users since its debut in March 2023. It handled about 1.5 billion API, or application programming interface, daily calls by early November, a 30-fold increase from the 50 million announced a year ago. In June, the company unveiled the latest version of its LLM called Ernie 4.0 Turbo.

## Problem solving

The steep increase reflects the rapid growth in generative AI applications in China over the past two years, said Robin Li, co-founder, chairman, and CEO of Baidu.

AI agents will serve as the predominant form of AI applications and are approaching a tipping point of explosive growth, he said. "Agents are more humanlike, more intelligent, and act like your sales, customer service representatives, or assistants. Agents will become a new vehicle for content, information and services," he explained.

"The most significant change we're seeing over the past 18 to 20 months is the accuracy of answers from the large language models," Li said. "I think ... that problem has pretty much been solved, meaning when you talk to a chatbot, a frontier model-based chatbot, you can basically trust the answer."

In AI, the biggest difference between China and some Western countries lies in applications, which are driving the rapid development of the industry in China, he said.

Although there are hundreds of foundation models in the Chinese market, Li believes the so-called product-market fit is more important to people. "We care more about what kind of applications can benefit from these kinds of frontier models," he said.

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“The multimodal LLM is an undeniable future development direction for generative AI technology.”

Lu Yanxia, research director at market research company IDC China

The company's focus is on reconstructing services with generative AI, from search and document creation to digital avatars for livestreaming shopping, he said. Currently, 18 percent of Baidu's search results are generated by Ernie Bot.

In October, iFlytek unveiled its latest LLM SparkDesk 4.0 Turbo, which outperforms GPT-4o in mathematical and coding capabilities, and achieved breakthroughs in various fields, such as multimodal understanding, text and graphic recognition, and multiple language abilities.

"Chinese tech companies' continuous technological advancements in LLMs will further promote the popularization of AI models, and bring fresh business opportunities for homegrown AI servers, cloud computing and chip companies," said Lu Yanxia, research director at market research company IDC China.

"The multimodal LLM is an undeniable future development direction for generative AI technology," Lu said, adding the open-source LLMs will substantially help

enterprises and developers accelerate AI innovation.

## Innovation continues

To accelerate the commercial use and popularization of AI technology, Alibaba, Baidu and Tencent, have slashed prices of their major LLM products. This year, they also provided some versions free of charge to enterprise users.

Competition in China's text-to-video AI models has intensified with domestic tech companies throwing their hats into the ring after OpenAI's Sora gained global attention following its launch in February this year.

Experts believe text-to-video generators have the potential to revolutionize the short-video, advertising and movie trailer industries.

Tencent recently launched the "video generation" function of its Hunyuan LLM, with 13 billion parameters and open-sourced capabilities. Users only need to enter a description to generate videos that support both Chinese and English input.

Video-sharing platform Kuaishou Technology has updated its Kling AI model, which comes with new features such as improved video quality, and image-to-video and video-extension capabilities. The model can interpret prompts to generate high-quality videos that mimic the physical world and create imaginative scenes from text instructions.

In addition, Chinese AI firm Shengshu Technology and Tsinghua University launched what they called the first Sora-level text-to-video large model Vidu in April, which can create a 16-second, high-definition video at 1080p resolution with a single click.

Pan Helin, a member of the Expert Committee for Information and Communication Economy, which operates under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, said LLMs have a high demand for data and knowledge in professional fields, and for talent that can fine-tune specialized models based on diverse industrial demands.

"The training of multimodal AI models necessitates massive requirements for

computing capacity resources, which will give a strong boost to the development of the computing power industry," he said.

Pan emphasized Chinese tech companies should improve independent innovation abilities in computing power chips and programming software.

They must also invest more in basic scientific research — including mathematics, statistics and computer science — to catch up with leading foreign counterparts amid intensifying global industry competition.

## Data advantages

As AI is increasingly used in a wide range of industries, demand for AI infrastructure such as computing power and servers will grow exponentially, said Zhu Keli, founding director of the China Institute of New Economy.

This will significantly promote the coordinated development of upstream and downstream segments of China's AI industrial chain, Zhu said.

Wang Peng, an associate research fellow at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, said: "China's major advantages in developing AI lie in its abundant data resources and diversified industrial application scenarios, while the US has taken the lead in basic AI research, chips, algorithms and other crucial technologies, and a sound innovation ecosystem."

Chinese enterprises should invest more to improve the quality of data required to train LLMs, cultivate AI talent, and expand cooperation with leading international AI firms, Wang said. More efforts are needed to make breakthroughs in core technologies covering AI chips and cloud servers, he added.

An increasing number of enterprises have emphasized the importance of investing in cutting-edge digital technologies, especially generative AI, to meet mounting challenges, amplify their potential, and reinvent businesses.

Forty-one percent of company executives surveyed in China believe they can realize the deployment of generative AI at their enterprises in six to 12 months, global consultancy Accenture said in a recent report. Seventeen percent are "extremely confident" that they have the right data strategies and the core digital capabilities in place to effectively leverage generative AI.

The report pointed out that companies with an advanced digital core, investments in strategic innovation, and a balanced approach to their technical debt — the cost and effort required to keep IT systems up to date and capable of meeting business needs — achieved higher revenue growth and profits.

Adapting to advances in technology and innovation, like AI, is the primary area of concern for executives heading into 2025, Accenture noted. Half of the business leaders interviewed are planning significant investments in AI technology in 2025.

Improving cybersecurity, fueling revenue growth, and enhancing supply chain resilience are the top three drivers of tech investment among Chinese organizations, it added.

"Organizations are trying to figure out how technology impacts their business operations, especially amid new advancements like generative AI," said Yu Yi, technology lead at Accenture Greater China. Getting value from disruptive technologies with an industry-leading digital core is more than just a critical success factor, it is a survival factor, Yu said.

Despite AI's development opportunities, challenges still remain in regard to ethics, copyright protection, privacy and data security, experts said.

They called for heightened efforts to ensure the safe and reliable application of the technology through global governance, as well as strengthening the protection of personal privacy and sensitive information. An international institutional framework and regulations need to be established to regulate data security, they suggested.

Zeng Yi, a researcher at the Institute of Automation of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, said management and governance of risks brought about by AI are becoming increasingly important issues.

Strengthening international cooperation and establishing a global AI development and governance institution under the framework of the United Nations, will allow for responsible and appropriate use of AI and its steady development, Zeng added.

## TOP NEWS

## New train features higher speed and energy efficiency

CR450 has set new global benchmarks on HSR tech, officials says

By LUO WANGSHU  
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Two prototypes of the CR450 high-speed train, unveiled on Sunday in Beijing, are capable of reaching a test speed of 450 kilometers per hour and an operational speed of 400 km/h, which will make the CR450 the fastest high-speed train in the world once it enters commercial service.

The CR450 will surpass China's CR400, which operates at 350 km/h.

According to China State Railway Group, which led the development of the train, the CR450 has set new benchmarks by excelling in key areas such as speed, energy efficiency, noise reduction and braking performance.

Despite its higher speed, the CR450 has braking efficiency similar to those of trains running at 350 km/h — a result of engineering advancements that ensure the

train's stability, performance and safety at higher speeds.

The CR450 also prioritizes passenger comfort, aiming to offer a smooth and quiet ride, even at 400 km/h. Advanced noise-reduction technologies ensure that the interior noise levels are comparable to those of the 350 km/h trains, providing a peaceful travel experience.

A standout feature of the CR450 is its exceptional energy efficiency. The train's running resistance has been reduced by 22 percent and its weight cut by 10 percent.

The train's interior has been redesigned for added comfort and convenience, increasing cabin space by 4 percent. Adjustable luggage racks and a versatile storage area cater to passenger needs. These innovations were made in anticipation of regulatory changes in passenger transportation.

Two prototypes debuted on Sunday, one developed by CRRC Changchun Railway Vehicles and the other by CRRC Sifang Co, each of which has a slightly different interior design, although both



The CR450AF high-speed train prototype is showcased in Beijing on Sunday. With an operational speed of 400 km per hour, the CR450 will be the fastest high-speed train in the world to operate commercially. ZHANG WEI / CHINA DAILY

focus on passenger comfort.

China State Railway Group has announced that further line tests and refinements will be conducted to ensure that the train meets all necessary standards.

Li Yongheng, an official of China State Railway Group, said that since 2012, China's railway sector has independently developed a series of products with scientific and technological innovation, represented by the Fuxing high-speed electric multiple unit trains, and has established a complete high-speed-rail technology system encompassing engineering construction, equipment manufacturing and operations management.

"China's high-speed railway system has taken a historic leap, shifting from a follower to a global leader, and its HSR technology has set an international benchmark," Li said.

"To further consolidate and boost China's edge in HSR technology, and to better serve and support Chinese modernization, our company, along with the relevant ministries and organizations, as well as research institutes, universities, enterprises and other scientific research resources, established an innovative team that jointly tackles key technological challenges," he noted.

Zhao Hongwei, chief researcher at the China Academy of Railway Sciences, emphasized the technological breakthroughs of the CR450, including advancements in high-speed safety, resistance reduction, energy efficiency, vibration and noise reduction, and intelligent integrated control technologies. These innovations have established a comprehensive technical framework for the 400 km/h train, setting a new global standard

in rail transportation.

Noting the challenge of achieving a lightweight design, considering both speed and energy efficiency, Wang Wenjing, a professor at the School of Mechanical, Electronic and Control Engineering of Beijing Jiaotong University, said that the university's team focused on reducing the weight of the load-bearing components.

"Advanced materials like carbon fiber were also incorporated to reduce weight while maintaining strength, thereby ensuring safety and durability at high speeds," she noted.

Sui Fusheng, a researcher at the Institute of Acoustics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, highlighted the complexity of balancing weight reduction with noise control. The team developed integrated composite

materials that provide both thermal insulation and soundproofing. This innovation reduced material costs and complexity while improving passenger comfort by adjusting temperature and controlling noise.

The CR450 exemplifies China's innovation-driven development strategy and demonstrates the country's scientific and technological capabilities, according to China State Railway Group. It also reflects the advantages of China's socialist system, fostering self-reliance in railway science and technology and contributing to the modernization of the railway industrial system, it said.

Over the past 15 years, China has built a railway network of over 160,000 kilometers, including the world's largest and most advanced high-speed rail network, which covers more than 46,000 kilometers.

## Unloading cargo



The crew of the icebreaker *Xuelong 2* operate a crane to unload cargo onto a barge in the Antarctic on Friday. The *Xuelong 2* and cargo vessel *Yang Sheng*, arrived at the sea near Qinling Station with goods for China's 41st Antarctic expedition. HUANG TAOMING / XINHUA

## Former Croatian president emphasizes cooperation

By ZHANG ZHOUXIANG  
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Describing the current state of Sino-European ties, former Croatian president Ivo Josipovic said the two sides are building relationships. While admitting that "there are some differences in approach", especially where the economy was concerned, he added that "there are some new ways to cooperate (on) new possibilities".

He lauded the role of Chinese companies that built the Peljesac Bridge in his native Croatia "very quickly and with very high quality", linking the south of Croatia with the rest of the country and serving as a key strategic infrastructure. Speaking highly of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, under which the bridge project was implemented, he said that China, as a major country, is not engaged in wars worldwide, and its peaceful policies have proved more appealing on the global stage.

In an exclusive interview with China Daily, Josipovic highlighted increasing demand from multiple global economies for lower tariffs

and more open market, adding that despite current competitions, in the long run, the situation will be much better. According to him, major economies are "opening little by little in spite of some obstacles".

What has impressed Josipovic the most is the philosophy promoted by the Chinese leadership with regard to the BRI, namely the win-win principle that benefits both parties involved in the project, instead of only one. "We have more and more people from Croatia doing business here in China and of course, Chinese people doing business in Croatia as well, from small private enterprises, restaurants, small shopping malls and so on, to important and big infrastructure projects that we are both engaging in."

He stressed that the political relationship between the two countries was important too, while speaking about his experience on being invited to the celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in June. He described the five principles as very important, especially for small countries.

The principles include mutual respect for territorial integrity and

sovereignty, nonaggression and noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

"Croatia, as an independent state, advocates the idea that all countries should be equal," Josipovic said. "We try to cooperate with all countries regardless of their internal political system. It's the independent decision of every state, to choose their path to the future."

He noted that currently mankind faces a dangerous situation because of conflicts worldwide, with the very real risk of a third World War, which he said would be a disaster for humanity.

To prevent the worst case scenario, Josipovic said it was important for all countries to cooperate. "Of course we have differences, but I think we should respect each other and not interfere in internal affairs of any country," he said. "It's very important because in spite of our differences, we are one, we are humanity."

To ensure the best case scenario, Josipovic is in favor of more and more intensive cultural exchanges, which he said can promote bilateral economic relationships, citing his own

country as an example. "We have the Confucius Institute now, some people are learning Chinese, and we have our artists coming to China, such as well-known pianist Maksim Mrvica, and Chinese artists are also in Croatia," he said. "I think it's very important to have cultural exchanges because that way we can understand each other better and that's the basis for better political and economic relations."

Having visited China more than 20 times, Josipovic recalled his trips to about a dozen Chinese cities.

"They have different kinds of duties. While Beijing is more connected to history, there are others such as Shanghai, more connected to technology, new techniques and so on," he said, mentioning the purpose of his trip to China this time, namely to attend the 30th founding anniversary of Beijing Art and Media Vocational College and co-signing an initiative in support of a community with a shared future for mankind.

"Now we have more and more exchanges, economic and political. We do not have any disputes with China," he said. "We have this very good relationship."

## Partnership: Pragmatic collaboration strengthened

From page 1

China's achievements as a developing country open windows of hope for other developing nations, showing that through unity, solidarity and cooperation, they can overcome even the most difficult challenges. The concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind proposed by President Xi Jinping has created a historic and momentous trend for the global community. I believe it aligns well with the prospect of "convergence and consensus" of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. The Iranian president's initiative for convergence is an effort to honor the legacy of our ancestors while bridging the future and simultaneously identifying opportunities within threats to illuminate the path for new collaborations. Our ancestors wisely believed that "the past is the beacon of the future" and that "behind every darkness, there is brightness".

The long-standing, authentic and comprehensive nature of the relations between Iran and China is a fundamental characteristic of the two countries' current relationship. It is a source of pride that the legacy of the past half-century of these relations, under the guidance of the wisdom of the two countries' leaders, has been accompanied by significant and valuable achievements. The presidents of today have defined a solid foundation for the bilateral relationship based on "shared values" and "ancient people-to-people connections", and have established firm pillars by emphasizing the principles of mutual respect, justice, equality, noninterference and win-win cooperation for development. These lay the groundwork for a model of comprehensive strategic partnership. By developing a comprehensive cooperation plan, both sides have strengthened mutual

political solidarity and trust and solidified their cooperation in various fields on a strong foundation.

Iran and China have long been collaborating to promote multilateralism and the development of indigenous values, defending each other's fundamental interests in international forums. Their close political and defense coordination, exchanges of high-level and party delegation, cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation in implementing the Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran as the beginning of "a chain of reconciliation" in West Asia, their work within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS to play a more active role in the international community, holding of intellectual and think tank dialogues, close cultural cooperation, and museum exchanges — especially the exhibition "Glory of Ancient Persia", which is currently on its third stop in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region after Beijing and Shanghai — are recent examples of pragmatic cooperation between the two countries. These efforts are in alignment with the implementation of President Xi's three global initiatives, and have played a crucial role in promoting multilateralism and strengthening economic, social, cultural and security cooperation.

Iran and China not only share common interests and concerns at the bilateral and regional levels but also at the trans-regional and international levels. Both countries firmly believe in the importance of multilateralism and the benefits of collective cooperation for the prosperity of the human community. They continue their close cooperation in multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization and BRICS. Collaboration with other members and partners, aimed at welfare, development and security, and addressing new global challenges, is among the priorities for both Iran and China. I am confident that China's presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2025 will create new opportunities for collective cooperation.

The two countries will continue to work together, driving the twin pillars of development and security for both the region and the world with strong determination. The "Maritime Security Belt-2024" joint naval drills, which showcased high-level cooperation and a shared effort to ensure maritime security, is another example of the pragmatic and strategic cooperation between the two countries.

The Middle East region is facing numerous challenges, with the Palestinian question at its core. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza, resulting from a dangerous pattern of lawlessness and rogue behavior supported by certain non-regional hegemonic powers, has intensified the situation. The Islamic Republic of Iran has always defended the legitimate cause of the Palestinian people for the right to self-determination. We share a common perspective with our Chinese friends that an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and the delivery of humanitarian aid are the most urgent priorities in the current situation in Palestine. Regarding the developments in Syria, the Islamic Republic of Iran has emphasized respect for Syria's unity, national sovereignty, and believes that decisions about Syria's future should be made solely by the people of Syria, without destructive interference or imposition from external forces. This fundamental principle should be recognized by all actors, as it is the people of the region who

have the decisive role in shaping their political, social, security and developmental destiny.

We are witnessing unprecedented changes in the world. These changes have confronted countries with both opportunities and complex challenges, placing the world at a historic crossroad, where, inevitably, they must choose between confrontation or cooperation, exclusion or inclusion, closeness or openness, and chaos or peace.

Although some countries attempt to distort facts by falsely dividing the world into "democratic" and "non-democratic" categories, and using tools such as "sanctions", "pressure" and "double standards" to restrict countries and force them to choose values and interests that align with their own, Iran and China will always stand on the side of development, prosperity, cooperation and friendship along with the countries of the Global South, and will stand on the right side of history countering unilateralism and bullying. This is because "confrontation and hostility" only weaken the collective interests of the international community, and in the end, no one will emerge victorious.

Iran and China, as two ancient Asian civilizations, are "friends in times of hardship" whose cooperation has withstood the test of time. Together, the two countries have reached "new heights" to fulfill their role as two responsible countries in ensuring peaceful development of the human community.

The next "golden 50 years of future relations between Iran and China" will show that this journey marks the beginning of a new chapter in strategic cooperation between the two countries, specially, as the wise Chinese ancestors said: "actions speak louder than words".

The author is foreign minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

## Carter: Peace efforts will be remembered

From page 1

"Our being the only US-based organization to do this is a stark indication of how the bilateral landscape has changed in recent years," Jimmy Carter said then.

"In December 1978, when Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping and I announced our decision, we knew that we were opening an era of opportunity for both nations. I have been proud to witness the benefits that have followed," Carter said in a talk with the George H. W. Bush Foundation for US-China Relations in August 2021.

Iran had held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days during Carter's presidency, and the story dominated US headlines the entire time. The hostages were released on the day that Reagan was inaugurated in 1981.

Carter also had to contend with a Middle East oil embargo, which led to long lines at gasoline stations in the United States, along with soaring inflation.

In September 1978, he invited Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Camp David in Maryland for almost two weeks of peace talks between their nations.

The talks concluded with the signing of the Camp David Accords, memorialized by one of the most enduring images of the era, as all three men joined hands.

Zhao Huanxin in Washington contributed to this story.

## CHINA

# PLA conducts patrols over Huangyan

Efforts continued to safeguard national sovereignty in the South China Sea

By **JIANG CHENGLONG**  
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The People's Liberation Army conducted combat readiness patrols on Sunday in the territorial waters, airspace, and surrounding areas of China's Huangyan Island in the South China Sea.

This was the third of such operations conducted by the Chinese military near the island, which an expert said was designed to send a strong signal that China takes concrete actions to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The PLA's Southern Theater Command announced the operation in a statement released on Sunday.

It said that since December, the theater command has been organizing naval and air forces to continuously strengthen patrols and vigilance around the territorial waters and airspace of Huangyan Island.

This effort has further enhanced the control over the relevant maritime and airspace areas, resolutely safeguarding national sovereignty and security and firmly maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea, the statement said.

Liu Lin, a professor of international strategy at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, said that combat readiness patrols are a military term referring to patrols conducted in a state of combat preparation, which is higher than regular patrols.

"In such operations, both front-line and rear forces, including command, communication, firepower, and reconnaissance systems, are maintained in a state of readiness for combat," she said, noting that these patrols are conducted to respond to "any potential emergencies".

Prior to this operation, the Southern Theater Command had conducted two combat readiness patrols in the territorial waters or airspace of Huangyan Island in mid and late November, respectively.

On Nov 8, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr signed the Maritime Zones Act and the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, attempting to unlawfully include China's Huangyan Island and most of the islands and reefs of the Nansha Islands, along with related waters, in its maritime zones.

Two days later, the Chinese government released baselines

for the territorial sea adjacent to Huangyan Island in accordance with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone.

Liu said that the PLA's combat readiness patrols are intended to enhance control over the maritime and airspace areas of Huangyan Island.

"The provocations by the Philippines around the maritime and airspace areas of Huangyan Island have been frequent in recent times. Therefore, it is indeed necessary and urgent for China to strengthen control over these areas through combat readiness patrols," she said.

According to the China Coast Guard, since October, the Philippines side has attempted three times to intrude into the maritime and airspace around Huangyan Island using aircraft or government vessels.

On Dec 19, a Philippine C-208 aircraft illegally entered the airspace over Huangyan Island and was driven away by the China Coast Guard.

Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman Zhang Xiaogang on Thursday also responded to recent comments of the Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson, who claimed that the giant vessels of the China Coast Guard attacked the small vessels of the Philippine Coast Guard and that these acts of intimidation and spreading of misinformation aim at hindering the activities of the Philippine fishermen.

Zhang said the Philippines' efforts to play victim to elicit sympathy from and confuse the international community will never work.

He stressed that China has indisputable sovereignty over South China Sea islands and its adjacent waters.

Zhang noted that the maritime disputes between China and the Philippines have nothing to do with the size of countries, but the merits of fact matter.

"The Philippine side repeatedly organized its coast guard vessels and fishing boats to violate China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests and undermine peace and stability in the South China Sea," he said.

"We urge the Philippine side to change course and return to the right track of resolving issues through negotiation and consultation."

## Flight frenzy unleashed



A model aircraft is ejected into the sky during a youth aviation model championship in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, on Saturday. A total of 690 students from 67 schools in the city competed in 13 events.  
SU QIAOJIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

## Adjustments boost efficiency in Xiong'an

By **ZHANG YU** in Shijiazhuang  
zhangyu1@chinadaily.com.cn

The Xiong'an New Area in Hebei province has taken a solid step towards transitioning into an urban management system, with newly adjusted departments and committees now operational. The move is part of efforts to support high-standard construction and high-quality development in the national-level new area.

Located about 100 kilometers southwest of Beijing, Xiong'an was established in April 2017 to advance the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, a key national strategy.

The area convened a mobilization meeting on Saturday to announce organizational adjustments. According to the adjustments, the area now houses 21 working departments and four sub-district administrative committees. The changes aim to enhance institutional functions, including in education, healthcare, technological innovation, industrial development, administrative approvals and urban governance.

The restructuring adheres to principles of streamlining and efficiency, aligning with directives from President Xi Jinping during his May 2023 visit to Xiong'an. Xi emphasized the need to make steady progress toward the establishment of an urban management system.

Under the new adjustments, Xiong'an now operates under a two-tier management structure encompassing the new area and sub-districts and a three-tier service model that includes communities. The changes strengthen the role of administrative committees in four key sub-districts: Rongdong, Rongxi, Zan'gang and a startup area.

Xiong'an's administrative committee, a dispatched agency of the Hebei provincial government, wields powers akin to a municipal government but with provincial-level authority over economic and social management. A regulation implemented in 2021 mandates that Xiong'an optimize its organizational structure for efficiency and establish a comprehensive institutional framework.

The adjustments are driving innovations in management hierarchy,

resource allocation, law enforcement, public services and urban operations. Officials are also creating effective market mechanisms to spur development and a modern social security system to enhance public services.

Efforts are underway to provide staffing support for relocated universities, hospitals, newly established schools and community health centers, facilitating Xiong'an's role as a hub for relocating noncapital functions from Beijing. Together with Beijing's subcenter in Tongzhou, Xiong'an is part of a dual-wing strategy addressing Beijing's urban challenges.

As of present, the development area of Xiong'an spans more than 200 square km and it boasts a total construction area of nearly 50 million square meters, with 4,780 buildings completed, according to the administrative committee.

By 2035, Xiong'an aims to become a high-level, modern socialist city characterized by green development, openness, innovation, smart systems, livability, and harmony between people and nature, according to the area's development plans.

## Henan expands 'Pubing 03' wheat cultivation

By **SHI BAOYIN**  
and **PENG CHAO**  
in Xinxiang, Henan

A new wheat variety bred through hybridization with crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*) has begun undergoing extensive cultivation in China's Yellow River-Huaihe River region, with an aim to develop a variety with improved disease resistance and climate adaptability.

Named "Pubing 03," the variety was developed by the Zhongyuan Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Henan province, a key agricultural hub. It boasts resistance to diseases, cold, and lodging while delivering high yields, researchers said.

Henan Zhongyuan Nonggu United Seed Industry Co acquired the rights to produce and operate the variety for 6.66 million yuan (\$910,000) in October. General Manager Pan Yongsheng said the company has planted "Pubing 03" across 120 hectares this year and plans to expand cultivation next year to provinces including Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, and Shaanxi.

Crested wheatgrass, a wild relative of wheat, is highly resistant to drought, cold, and diseases, making it a valuable gene donor for wheat improvement. Despite global scientific efforts, hybridization with crested wheatgrass had largely failed until a CAAS team led by researcher Li Lihui succeeded after three decades of work, according to Zhang Jimpeng, a researcher at the CAAS Institute of Crop Sciences and a member of Li's team.

Zhang said "Pubing 03" is resistant to powdery mildew, leaf rust and stripe rust, while its shorter height and elastic stem reduce the risk of lodging. The variety's slower growth during the seedling stage and thinner leaves enhance cold resistance, making it easier to grow and manage than common varieties.

"This winter's warmer climate has accelerated the growth of common wheat varieties, potentially leaving them vulnerable to cold spells in spring," Zhang said. "In contrast, 'Pubing 03' offers stability under extreme weather conditions."

Trial fields yielded 10,500 kilograms per hectare, Zhang said, noting that while the yield is slightly lower than some high-yield varieties, the new wheat is critical for ensuring stable production under challenging conditions.

Henan province is positioning Zhongyuan Nonggu, a 1,612-square-kilometer core agricultural region, as a national hub for seed industry innovation. The region is home to 58 provincial-level or higher innovation platforms, 53 seed research teams, and 82 seed enterprises, according to Sun Weifeng, director of Henan's agriculture and rural affairs department.

Since its establishment, Zhongyuan Nonggu has produced 161 new crop varieties approved by national or provincial authorities, Sun said, highlighting the region's role in advancing China's agricultural innovation and resilience.

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## Fish fortune



The first fish hunted fetches 1.199,999 yuan (\$164,400) on Saturday at the open ceremony of the 23rd Ice and Snow Fishing and Hunting Cultural Tourism Festival at Chagan Lake in Songyuan, Jilin province. Chagan Lake, one of China's top 10 freshwater lakes, is the largest inland lake in Jilin. It is renowned for its crystal-clear waters, abundant fish resources and traditional fishing methods. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

## Briefly

### Survivor of 'comfort women' system dies

A 95-year-old survivor of the Japanese army's "comfort women" system during World War II passed away on Saturday in Hunan province, leaving only eight registered survivors on the Chinese mainland. Previous research has shown that some 400,000 women in Asia were

forced to be "comfort women" — sexual slaves for the Japanese army during World War II — and nearly half of them were Chinese. The survivor, born in 1930 in Pingjiang county, Hunan, was abducted by Japanese soldiers with her cousin in early 1945. They, along with other girls taken from various locations, were confined in a house in Pingjiang, where they endured severe sex-

ual abuse, according to the Research Center for Comfort Women at Shanghai Normal University. After more than a month of captivity, she was rescued by Chinese soldiers.

### 'Ice City' cracks down on ticket scalping

China's "Ice City" Harbin in Heilongjiang province has cracked

down on 21 ticket reselling cases and arrested 23 offenders, the local police said on Saturday. Harbin has emerged as one of China's top winter travel destinations, attracting visitors from around the globe. Ticket scalpers illegally acquired park tickets through software from online platforms and then resold them at inflated prices.

XINHUA



The brand of UnionPay can be seen at the Hong Kong International Airport. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

By YUAN SHENGAO

# BAY WAY TO EASY PAY

UnionPay celebrates 20 years of dedicated services in Macao

UnionPay launched its service in the Macao Special Administrative Region on Sept 8, 2004, making Macao the second region to accept UnionPay cards outside the Chinese mainland. Over the past 20 years, UnionPay has always adhered to the original intent of "payment for the people", giving full play to its advantages in product innovation, service network and information technology. It has now grown into a popular payment brand among residents in Macao.

Since the release of the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area in 2019, UnionPay has been advancing the "soft connectivity" of financial payment in the Greater Bay Area at a faster pace to better support the economic, trade and personnel exchanges between the GBA and other regions. This "soft connectivity" includes financial services, rules and standards and is distinct from the "hard connectivity" of infrastructure, such as transportation.

## Local acceptance network

In Macao, with a land area of 33.3 square kilometers, people can experience the blending of Chinese and Western cultures and both a "fast" and "slow" pace of life. The "UnionPay" tricolor logo is now ubiquitous in Macao, and can be found in tourist-packed attractions and bustling buses to supermarkets and convenience stores.

Since its cards became accepted in Macao in 2004, UnionPay has been improving the overall payment acceptance environment in Macao. UnionPay has established a UnionPay card-based and mobile payment acceptance network that can simultaneously meet local, cross-boundary and cross-border payment needs. UnionPay cards are fully accepted in merchants' point of sale terminals and ATMs, covering various consumption scenarios such as clothing, food, housing, transportation, entertainment and travel. UnionPay is deeply integrated into people's daily lives in multiple scenarios and forms in Macao, providing local residents and tourists with convenient and high-quality payment experiences.

UnionPay International accelerated the development of related businesses to keep up with the increasing popularity of mobile payment in Macao. In 2019, UnionPay International took the lead in the launch of Apple Pay in Macao, enabling local cardholders to use Apple Pay for convenient online and offline payments and making UnionPay the first bank card organization to bring Macao Apple Pay.

UnionPay now covers all mobile payment scenarios for residents in Macao through in-depth collaboration with local partners. Consumers from the Chinese mainland and other regions can also bind UnionPay cards to mobile wallets such as UnionPay App, Huawei Pay and Apple Pay, and use their smartphones to pay for public transportation, food services and shopping.

In Macao, transportation is one of the distinctive service scenarios supported by UnionPay. UnionPay cards can be bound with seven mainstream local wallet products supporting Macao bus code scanning for payment. Macao residents can also use UnionPay cards and the UnionPay app to purchase light rail transit tickets. During their visit to



Clockwise from top: The UnionPay app is advertised on a tram. The ways to use UnionPay are advertised at a building of New Yaohan in Macao. A store in Macao offers a discount to customers that pay via the QR code of UnionPay. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Macao, Chinese mainland tourists can use the UnionPay app to scan QR codes and pay the fares of all buses operated by the two local bus companies.

## Business localization

In September 2021, Bank of China Macau Branch and Sands China joined hands to issue the first co-branded UnionPay credit card targeting Macao residents, a few days after the release of the overall development plan for the Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin. In December 2024, UnionPay International announced a collaboration with Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (Macao) and New Yaohan in Macao to issue the ICBC New Yaohan UnionPay Dual Currency Diamond Card.

These cards can be used in the global UnionPay acceptance network and support various payment

methods such as card swiping, code scanning, and "waving" smartphones, reflecting UnionPay International's efforts to accelerate business localization in Macao.

The first local UnionPay card was issued just a few months after UnionPay cards became accepted in Macao in 2004. Over the past two decades, UnionPay has made great efforts to enhance payment services for Macao residents.

By incorporating its product and technological advantages, UnionPay has improved payment service features, enriched payment service offerings and introduced a diverse service system covering "cards, QR codes and mobile Pay products".

These services encompass multiple functions such as card swiping, code scanning and mobile contactless payment, and comes with a wealth of benefits for merchants in the Chinese mainland. The card has been popular among Macao residents since its launch. In 2024, UnionPay

and the global UnionPay network.

In the GBA, UnionPay has become a large card brand by the number of cards issued. In Macao, UnionPay International has launched a variety of UnionPay card products together with commercial banks that are tailored to segmented customer groups. These include GBA Youth Card and Guangxi tourism-themed cards, offering diverse benefits and discounts to meet the various card utilization and consumption needs.

After the launch of its "Project Excellence 2024", UnionPay has encouraged local commercial banks to issue the Splendor Plus Card. The card integrates multiple payment functions such as card swiping, code scanning and mobile contactless payment, and comes with a wealth of benefits for merchants in the Chinese mainland. The card has been popular among Macao residents since its launch. In 2024, UnionPay

cards issued in Macao have seen rapid growth in transaction volume in the Chinese mainland.

In line with the rapid development of mobile payment in Macao in the past few years, UnionPay International has been innovating collaboration models, working with partners to boost the development of Macao's mobile payment industry. Macao witnessed significant growth in mobile payment in 2018, which is called the "first year of mobile payment in Macao".

In the same year, the Hong Kong and Macao version of the UnionPay app was unveiled in Macao. Since then, UnionPay International has deepened cooperation with local commercial banks, payment institutions and other industry players to support the use of local wallets in the global UnionPay acceptance network by binding with UnionPay cards or issuing digital cards within the app.

Currently, various UnionPay-supported wallets, including the Hong Kong and Macao version of the UnionPay app, Bank of China Macau Mobile Banking, ICBC Macau e-Payment and Tai Fung Pay, are available in Macao, significantly enhancing the local, cross-boundary and cross-border mobile payment experience of local residents. UnionPay's mobile payment services have become familiar and popular payment tools among local residents.

## Payment in GBA

Amid the development of the Greater Bay Area, there has been a rise in the number of personal exchanges between the Chinese mainland and Macao, and Macao has enjoyed more diversified economic development. UnionPay has further deepened innovation and cooperation in the financial payment sector across Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, accelerating regional economic development and benefiting local people.

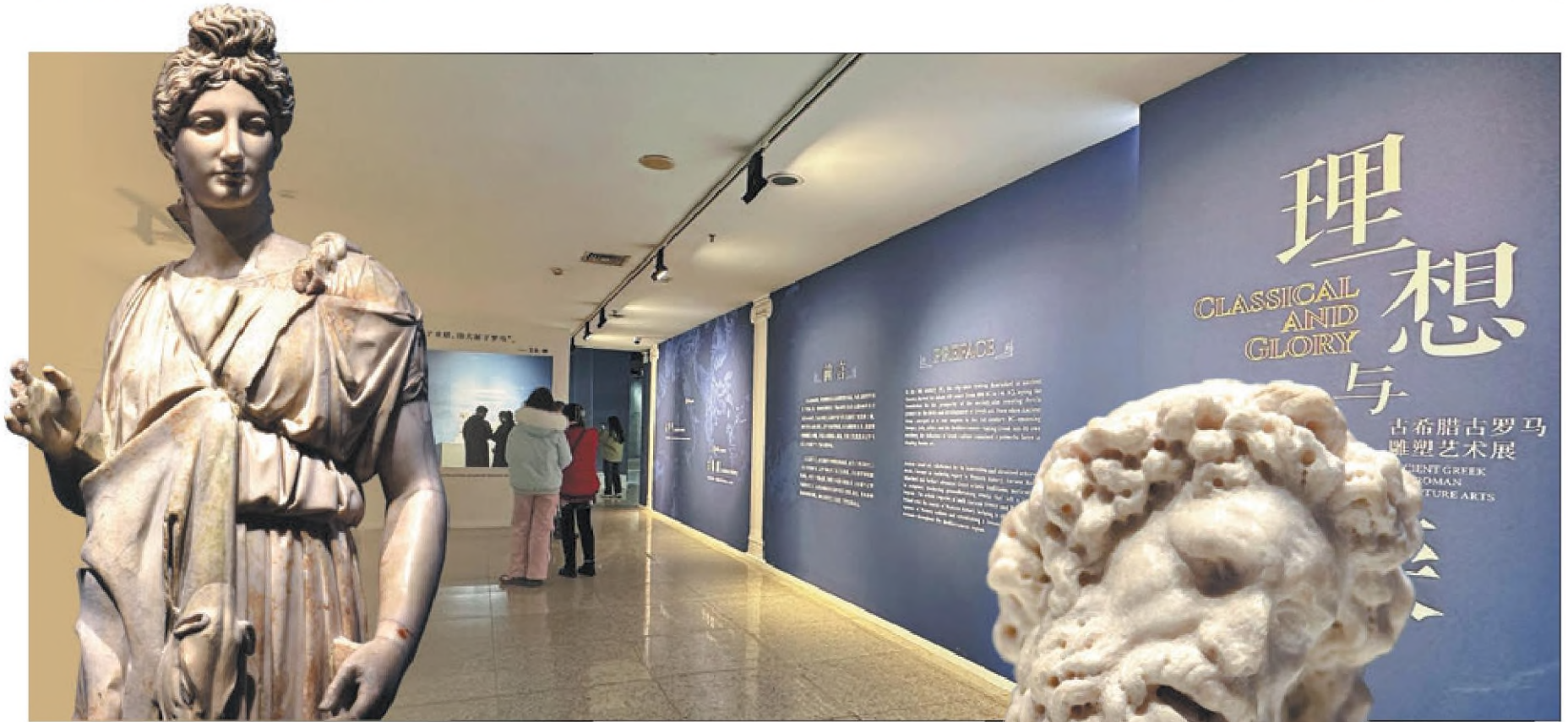
Every weekend, vehicles heading north from Macao travel through the streets near the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge toward the boundary. A man surnamed Zhou, who often drives to Guangzhou for travel, said: "By binding a Macao-issued UnionPay card with the ETC system, I can quickly pay to use the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, highways, and parking lots. Traveling to the Chinese mainland has become much more convenient."

UnionPay's mobile travel services have been upgraded along with Macao's accelerated integration into the GBA. UnionPay International has partnered with E-Serve to support the binding of UnionPay cards with the ETC system for "Northbound Travel for Macao Vehicles". It allows vehicles that enter Guangdong province from Macao to quickly traverse the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge and highways in Guangdong by using the UnionPay app, and allows drivers to enjoy contactless payment for parking facilities in Guangdong. Additionally, Macao residents can also pay for bus fares in Zhuhai by scanning a QR code in their local wallets.

With a focus on key entry ports, high-speed railway stations and airports in Hong Kong and Macao, UnionPay International has expanded its acceptance coverage in various consumption scenarios. Regarding high-frequency consumption scenarios such as food services, supermarkets, department stores and cultural tourism, UnionPay has targeted merchants in the GBA to ensure the smooth acceptance of UnionPay payment services. UnionPay has joined hands with merchants to offer high-quality consumer benefits and provided convenience for residents with "northbound travel plans".

UnionPay continues to enhance its service quality to facilitate payment for medical services and bills, making it more worry-free, comfortable and heartwarming for Macao residents in the Chinese mainland. The Hong Kong and Macao version of the UnionPay app can now show medical insurance e-certificates, supporting the medical treatment of Macao residents in Guangdong.

Residents and enterprises in Macao can also pay for tuition fees, social security and taxes in the Chinese mainland with locally issued UnionPay cards or the Hong Kong and Macao version of the UnionPay app.



The "Classical and Glory" Ancient Greek and Roman Sculpture Arts Exhibition will open on Wednesday.  
PHOTOS BY SU HANG AND LIU YAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

# Iconic art in cradle of Chinese culture

Shanxi Museum in Taiyuan to exhibit ancient sculptural treasures dating from Greek and Roman times

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The sculptural arts are one of the gems of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Residents in North China's Shanxi province will have an opportunity to glimpse the essence of these cultural assets as an ancient sculpture arts exhibition will kick off at the beginning of the new year at Shanxi Museum in Taiyuan, the provincial capital.

The event, called "Classical and Glory" Ancient Greek and Roman Sculpture Arts Exhibition, will open on Wednesday.

The event's organizers said that this exhibition will be not only a display of artworks but "a dialogue of civilizations".

Shanxi is one of the cradles of Chinese culture, with its earliest ancient civilization reaching its peak some 3,000 years ago. This was evidenced in an archaeological discovery at the Taosi site in Xiangfen county, which pointed to the formation of one of the earliest states in China.

That was roughly when the city states emerged in ancient Greece, which had ushered in a period of social and cultural prosperity for more than 600 years — from c.8th century to c.2nd century. Even after the fall of ancient Greece in 146 BC, its culture and arts continued to influence those of the ancient Roman Empire, which began in the early 1st century.

As the poet Edgar Allan Poe wrote: "To the glory that was Greece, And the grandeur that was Rome", the ancient Greek and Roman cultures are the origins of Western civilization. The two cultures feature a continuity and ancient Roman Culture has a strong influence and inheritance from ancient Greek Culture.

And this is especially true in the sculptural arts. During the Hellenistic and Classical period, ancient Greek sculptors aimed to depict the human form realistically but in an idealized and harmonious manner. Ancient Greek sculptors carefully studied human anatomy and sought to capture the essence of physical perfection and inner vitality. They believed the human body reflected divine beauty, and their sculptures became a medium to express this belief. Deities were the common subjects featured in the sculptors' works.

There were also remarkable similarities in the works created by ancient Roman sculptors. Roman sculpture is known for its grandeur and realism. Many depict ideas, things, or people that were important in Roman history and culture, such as those related to mythology, historical events and political figures.

*Sleeping Aphrodite* is among the works to go on display.

LIU YAN / FOR CHINA DAILY



The statues of various Greek deities are among the cultural treasures to go on show at the exhibition. LIU YAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Like the Greeks, Roman sculptural art strove for perfection and illustrated its subjects in this manner, especially when it came to gods, goddesses and heroes. The Greek and Roman sculptural arts also pursued a similar level of aesthetics in geometry.

At the exhibition at Shanxi Museum, a total of 134 ancient Greek and Roman sculptures will be on display. The exhibition will be arranged in five sections to present the arts of different locales, periods and styles. The five sections are called "Gods of the Olympus", "Blessing from Gods", "the Grandeur of Augustan Arts", "Garden of Rome" and "External Vitality".

The Gods of Olympus section features the sculptures created in the Classical Period of ancient Greece, from 480 to 325 BC. The works highlight a style of harmony, grandeur and idealism. In addition, other cultural rel-

ics of that period, like attic-style vases and pottery vessels, will be on show.

There are also sculptures created by Roman sculptors imitating the classical Greek style. One exhibit is the *Apollo Sauroktonos*, a sculpture created by ancient Roman sculptor Praxiteles featuring a bow-holding Apollo fixing his sights on a lizard. Despite its inheritance of the classical style, a prominent characteristic of the sculpture is that Apollo was not portrayed as a god of grandeur, but a young man of beauty and tenderness.

The Blessing from Gods section features works created in the transitional period from the ancient Greek to ancient Roman. Deities of the early Roman mythology are major subjects of the works. While the inheritance of classical Greek style is still visible, the works show a balance of solemnity and amiability of the deities, which are depicted in smoother lines and more casual postures.

The Grandeur of Augustan Arts section mainly features the busts of the Augustan period. The style of sculptures shows a completion of the Greek-Roman transition, with an emphasis on realism and details. The

busts, or portraits depicting real or realistic looking people, are one of the major contributions that ancient Roman sculptors made to the world. A bust usually features great detail in the facial expression to highlight the personality of the individual.

The Garden of Rome section aims to present the lives of ancient Romans by exhibiting sculptures, glassware and mosaic arts of that period.

The External Vitality section mainly displays sculptures and other articles relating to funeral and burial ceremonies during the ancient Roman period.

Thinking about life and death was a major part of the philosophic framework of the ancient Romans and was also a theme of the period's sculptural art.

Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture has influenced art in many regions of the world. And this influence also reached China's Shanxi province, said an expert at Shanxi Museum.

One of the three Buddhist cave art treasure houses in China, Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi's Datong city, is a monumental work of the cultural integration between China and the West. In the processing of creating cave statues more than 1,500 years ago, the influence of the Gandhara art was remarkable.

In the first century, Buddhism spread from Gandhara to China through the Silk Road. Along the route, a large number of Buddhist statues influenced by Gandhara culture were created, bearing witness to the thousands of years of cultural exchanges between the East and West.

Gandhara, an ancient region spanning what is now northwest Pakistan and parts of east Afghanistan, was historically a crossroads linking India, Persia and other cultural centers as faraway as ancient Greece.

Gandhara Buddhist art — which originated in the Kushan Empire, a Central Asian state founded by nomads originally from China's Gansu province and Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region — is a unique art style that blends Greco-Persian and Buddhist influences.

Buddhist statues were among the major art forms influenced by the ancient Greek and Roman sculpture arts, according to the



The statue of Athena is one of the exhibits to be displayed.

SU HANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

museum expert. "Statue making was not the common practice in the early stage of Buddhism," he said. "It became popular after being influenced by the Western sculpture arts."

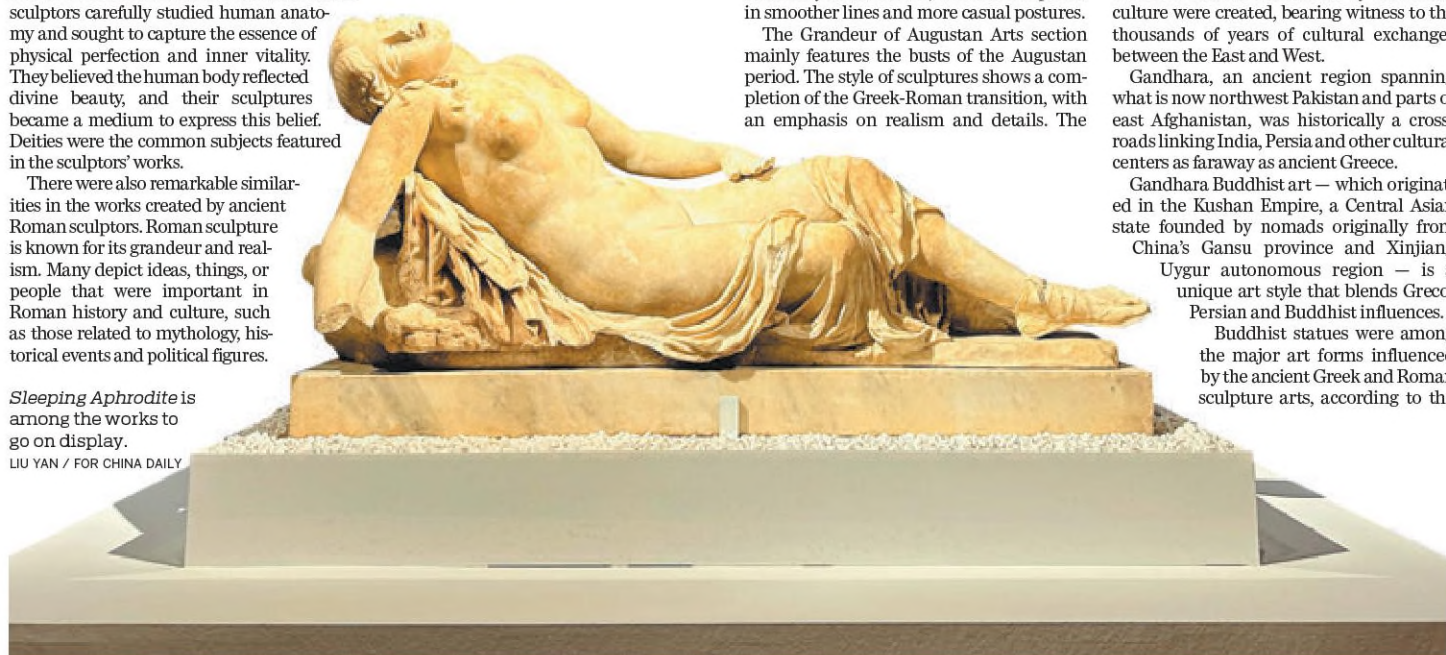
Many Buddhist statues can be found along the route of Buddhism's spread in China, like the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu, Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi and Longmen Grottoes in Henan.

"In Yungang Grottoes, the Gandhara or even Greek elements are visible on many Buddha statues, like the curly hair and details of clothes," he added.

"After the communication and integration among different cultures that lasted for thousands of years, Shanxi Museum deems it an important mission to continue the cultural exchanges in the context of a modern era," said the expert. The "Classical and Glory" Ancient Greek and Roman Sculpture Arts Exhibition is the latest move in this effort.

Prior to the exhibition's opening, Shanxi Museum hosted a seminar on ancient Greek and Roman sculpture arts. With attending experts' views shared on the social media, the seminar was aimed to enhance visitors' understanding of the exhibits.

Liu Yan contributed to this story.



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## BUSINESS

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AI, IoT,  
next-gen  
tech to drive  
future growth

REPORTER'S LOG

By Ouyang Shijia

As the year draws to a close, China has set its sights firmly on the future, with a roadmap laid out during the recently concluded annual Central Economic Work Conference. The focus is clear — scientific and technological innovation will be the cornerstone of the nation's economic strategy heading into 2025.

The goal is nothing short of transformative — to create new quality productive forces and overhaul China's industrial system, building a framework for a modernized, tech-driven economy.

As a journalist, I find it fascinating to see how the country is positioning itself at the forefront of the next industrial revolution.

With major technological projects and large-scale demonstrations of new technologies, China is laying the groundwork for fostering new quality productive forces. This initiative, which centers around emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and the internet of things, promises to dramatically reshape industries across the board.

The government is keen to foster innovation in emerging sectors, nurturing the industries of the future while ensuring that China maintains its competitive edge in strategic technological areas.

Yu Hongjun, former vice-minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, explained that China's push into digital infrastructure is already paying off.

Over the past few years, the country has made major strides in establishing a robust digital economy.

The widespread adoption of 5G and the development of 6G satellite communication systems have set the stage for what Yu calls a smart, connected economy.

He said during the World Internet of Things Convention held recently in Beijing that the rise of new IoT, new data and new business models are quietly but powerfully reshaping China's economic landscape. This is the bedrock of the new quality productive forces the country is betting on for long-term success.

As I dug deeper into the details, I realized the scale of what's unfolding here.

He Xuming, chairman of the World Internet of Things Convention Executive Committee, said the global digital economy, driven by IoT technologies, is growing at an annual rate of 20 percent. This year, global IoT connections are expected to increase by more than 23 percent to surpass 25 billion.

What's even more impressive is that China is leading the charge in IoT infrastructure construction and innovative development in the digital economy.

China is poised to build over 4.3 million 5G base stations this year, helping to connect over 3 billion IoT devices, said He, adding that the traditional digital economy in China is projected to reach an annual output value of over 70 trillion yuan (\$9.59 trillion), growing at a rate of more than 20 percent. With nearly a million companies already operating in the IoT space, the groundwork for China to lead in new quality productive forces is well underway.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this push is its potential to trigger the fourth industrial revolution. Wei Jianguo, former vice-minister of commerce, said the core of this revolution is the convergence of digital technologies with manufacturing processes. The digitalization of industry, Wei argues, will redefine global production systems, and China, with its advanced manufacturing supply chains and digital leadership, is uniquely positioned to spearhead this transformation.

Wei further emphasized that the fourth industrial revolution will not only drive economic growth, but also profoundly impact China's social structure, economic models, and the relationship between humans and nature.

As I reflect on these developments, it's clear that the shift toward new quality productive forces, driven by AI, IoT and other next-generation technologies, will inevitably position China as a global innovation powerhouse.

The government's proactive approach to fostering these changes is strategic, forward-thinking and deeply embedded in its broader economic goals for the next few years.

The story unfolding here isn't just about economic growth — it's about reshaping the very fabric of industry and society in ways we're only just beginning to comprehend.

As 2025 approaches, all eyes will be on China to see how it executes this ambitious plan and whether it can truly lead the world into the next industrial revolution.

## Key pivot foreseen in macro strategy

China preparing for expansionary fiscal, monetary moves amid consumption-driven economic shift in 2025

By OUYANG SHIJIA and ZHOU LANXU

China's policymakers are set to take a more proactive approach to macroeconomic policies in the year ahead, aiming to tackle both short-term challenges arising from lackluster demand and structural issues, said economists.

Citing the recently concluded Central Economic Work Conference, they said the country is fine-tuning its macroeconomic strategy, marking a significant shift toward a consumption-driven economy as it prepares for expansionary fiscal and monetary policies in 2025.

"The deficit ratio for 2025 is likely to be the highest on record," said Xiong Yuan, chief economist at Guosheng Securities, anticipating that the government would set the projected deficit-to-GDP ratio for 2025 at 3.5-4 percent or higher in March, up from 3 percent for this year.

The Chinese government started to release the annual projected deficit ratio in 2010, with the highest reading in 2020 at 3.6 percent as COVID-19 hit, according to market tracker Wind Info.

Xiong said next year's quota of special local government bonds is expected to increase to more than 4.5 trillion yuan (\$616.5 billion) from a record high of 3.9 trillion yuan this year, in addition to special treasury bonds of over 2 to 3 trillion yuan in 2025, up from 1 trillion yuan for 2024.

Xiong's remarks came as the Central Economic Work Conference held in December pledged to implement more proactive and effective macroeconomic policies, boost domestic demand, drive the integration of sci-tech innovation and industrial innovation, and stabilize the real estate sector and stock markets.

The nation will maintain basic equilibrium in the balance of payments and better synchronize the income growth of households and economic expansion, according to the meeting.

"While promoting industrial sectors was the top task last year, expanding domestic demand is in the top spot this year," said Lu Ting, chief China economist at Nomura.

Lu said that the conference called for more specific measures to support consumption, including increasing basic pension payments, raising fiscal subsidies for basic medical insurance and developing policies to boost fertility.

"Overall, the conference adds support to our relatively optimistic view on fiscal policies in 2025 and our view that Beijing may stick to the 'around 5 percent' GDP growth target in 2025," he said.



Top: Consumers shop at a supermarket in Zaozhuang, Shandong province, in November. SUN ZHONGZHE / XINHUA

Above: A customer (right) checks social security documents at a bank branch in Chongqing in April. SUN KAIFANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

“While promoting industrial sectors was the top task last year, expanding domestic demand is in the top spot this year.”

Lu Ting, chief China economist at Nomura

According to the conference, policymakers pledged to roll out more initiatives to boost consumption, including greater strides in equipment upgrades and consumer goods trade-in programs.

Looking forward, Lu said policymakers might consider an increase in spending on social security for lower-income households and encouraging childbirth.

"We especially expect policymakers to significantly increase payments to those rural pensioners (55 percent of total pensioners) whose average monthly pension income is only 225 yuan," he said. "They may also increase financial support for families with a second or third child. And they may also waive part of the annual 400 yuan fee on basic medical insurance for low-income individuals."

As the conference reiterated a "more proactive fiscal policy," Lu said his team forecasts a total of 3.6 trillion yuan in incremental borrowing for 2025 versus 2024, or around 2.6 percent of GDP.

"We expect the official deficit ratio to be raised from 3 percent this year to 4 percent next year," he said. "We expect net financing from central government special bonds to be raised to 1.5 trillion yuan from 1 trillion yuan in 2024."

Regarding local government special bonds, Lu said his teams expect a small increase to 4.5 trillion yuan in 2024.

Echoing the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee held earlier this month, the Central Economic Work Conference statement vowed to conduct "moderately accommodative" monetary policy, switching away from a "prudent" monetary policy for the past 14 years.

"The use of words 'moderately accommodative' for monetary policy is the first time since the meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee in July 2010, when China was still dealing with the aftermath of the global financial crisis," Lu added. "The readout emphasizes the dual roles of aggregate and structural monetary policy instruments, leaving room for potential incremental policies from these People's Bank of China structural facilities."

The Central Economic Work Conference also promises to launch policy rate cuts and reserve requirement ratio cuts in a timely manner or whenever it is deemed appropriate, maintaining sufficient liquidity, leading the growth rate of aggregate financing and monetary supply to be mostly aligned with the expected targets of economic growth and price inflation.

"The focus on the policy rate and RRR cuts is consistent with our view, as we forecast two rounds of policy rate cuts in the first quarter and second quarter of 2025, respectively, and one 50-basis-point RRR cut before end-2024 and two 50-basis-points RRR cuts in 2025," Lu said.

With the help of a raft of government measures aimed at stimulating domestic demand and stabilizing growth in the second half of this year, China's economy showed sustained recovery with the latest economic indicators pointing to

green shoots of a steady rebound heading into 2025.

Data released by the National Bureau of Statistics showed that China's value-added industrial output grew 5.4 percent year-on-year in November, up from a 5.3 percent rise in the previous month.

"This improvement reflects the impact of a series of incremental policy measures that have bolstered market confidence and supported demand recovery," said Wang Qing, chief macroeconomic analyst at Golden Credit Rating International.

Looking ahead, Wang believes that the demand for consumption and investment will continue to pick up amid a series of stimulus measures, driving strong growth in industrial production. "Industrial production growth will remain robust in December, likely in the range of 5 percent to 6 percent."

NBS data showed that the growth of retail sales slowed to 3 percent year-on-year in November from 4.8 percent in October, while fixed-asset investment saw 3.3 percent year-on-year growth during the January-November period, down from 3.4 percent in the first 10 months.

Wang said the growth rate of retail sales slowed in November, as this year's "Double 11" shopping festival presale started earlier, shifting some consumer demand from November to October.

With consumption-boosting policies taking effect gradually and the gradual improvement in consumer sentiment, Wang estimated retail sales to grow around 4.5 percent year-on-year in December.

"We anticipate that in 2025, policy measures to stimulate consumption will be further ramped up," he said.

Among these measures, Wang said the country may fund a 600 billion yuan trade-in deal for consumer goods to spark household demand, and the range of subsidized products is likely to expand to include consumer electronics, home furnishings, and other durable goods.

Meanwhile, he believes fiscal support for childbirth might be piloted next year, such as one-time or monthly subsidies for families with newborns, with the support scale potentially reaching 100 billion yuan.

"There may also be a nationwide issuance of consumption vouchers and subsidies in 2025, which would expand the scope of consumption stimulation from durable goods to include general merchandise and service consumption," he said. "This reflects an important shift in the current macroeconomic policy direction, where the previous countercyclical investment policies with a key emphasis on investment are now shifting toward a more balanced approach, prioritizing both consumption and investment, with an increased focus on consumption."

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From left: Peach flowers bloom in spring in Nyingchi, making it a major seasonal attraction in Xizang. JIANG FAN / XINHUA Mount Qomolangma seen from the northern slope in Shigatse. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY The pastoral scenery of Xizang is a big draw to overseas tourists. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

By YUAN SHENGAO

Xizang's inbound tourism has shown a strong recovery over the past two years after COVID-19 pandemic restrictions ended.

Statistics from the Xizang Department of Culture and Tourism show that, from January to July, the autonomous region in Southwest China received nearly 180,000 overseas tourist visits, up 308.6 percent from the same period of 2023.

The figures show that Xizang remains a favored destination for overseas tourists, despite a three-year lockdown starting from early 2020.

In the eyes of many overseas tourists, Xizang is a place worth visiting at least once in a lifetime. The autonomous region's spectacular landscape, pristine environment, long history, brilliant culture and colorful life have left unforgettable memories to many who have visited it.

In early September, a group of tourists from the United States, Mexico and Belgium arrived in Xizang. The major goal of their journey was to experience the folk culture, ecological environment, religions and everyday life.

A surprise for them was a vineyard in Sangri county in Lhokha city. They were informed that the site owned by the local winery Phagru Chateau, standing at an altitude of about 3,600 meters, might be among the world's highest vineyards.

A worker at the vineyard told the tourists that this place can produce one of the best grapes in the world because of its sunlight, dry weather and an irrigation system using water from the Yarlung Zangbo River.

In Lhokha's Dranang county, tourists visited the manufacturing plant of a garment company and tried on some clothes and hats made with traditional techniques.

Mason Smith from the US even asked a sewer to teach him to make a traditional Tibetan robe. "The production process is more difficult than I imagined," he said after trying to work on a sewing tool for a while.

Also in Dranang county, the tourist group visited a handicraft cooperative to experience the making of *shidiao*, a traditional craft that involves carving wooden, jade or metal items.

With a history of more than 300 years, the technique of *shidiao* has been included in Xizang's list of intangible heritage.

Pema Dradul, head of the cooperative and the sixth-generation inheritor of the craft, told the visitors that the art of *shidiao* features great details.

"A widespread legend about the technique is that a grain of highland barley was carved into the shape of a small insect," Pema Dradul said.

Pema Dradul began to learn the craft in 1981, when he was 12, from his elder brother. He said it usually takes more than five years to master the skills.

He said his cooperative now has more than 300 employees, many of whom have received tutoring from himself.

"A skilled worker can earn more than 10,000 yuan (\$1,374) a month, as our products are sought-after on the market," Pema Dradul said. "That's a considerable income in the rural areas."

Rural cooperatives are a burgeoning economic entity in rural Xizang, which take in rural residents as stakeholders.

In Changga village in Lhasa's Lhundrub county, the tourists visited a farming machine cooperative and a construction workers' cooperative.

Local officials told them the two cooperatives contributed 2.86 million yuan to the village in 2023. While family members got paid for their work, the village's 141 house-

# Xizang's allure proves irresistible to tourists

Number of international visitors to autonomous region up 300 percent



Potala Palace is the iconic cultural and architectural landmark in Lhasa. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Clockwise from left: Two overseas tourists are at the foot of Mount Kailash in Ngari prefecture. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY On the sidelines of an international event in Lhasa, foreign delegates visit the city's Norbulingka Park and pose for photos with young performers of Tibetan Opera. DEKYI DROLMA / FOR CHINA DAILY A woman takes photos in Lhasa's Jokhang Temple. DONG NAIDE / FOR CHINA DAILY

holds also received dividends of 436,000 yuan in total from the two cooperatives.

Jose Primo from Mexico showed great interest in the rural cooperative system in Xizang. "Now I understand a cooperative is an effective organization for production and economic operations in rural areas," Primo said. "It is a case of best practices that other countries can learn from."

The tourist group also visited the Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple, Barkor Street and Xizang Museum in

Lhasa to learn about the protection of Xizang's traditional cultural heritage.

### Tour group

Earlier in August 2023, Chris Chan, an American-Chinese from Los Angeles, had a nine-day tour of Xizang. He shared his experience on his social media account.

"I strongly recommend overseas tourists to join group tours organized by local travel agencies in Xizang. They have tailored options for them," he said.

Chan said he applied for group tour service offered by a travel agency in Lhasa. Its tailored services include helping overseas tourists prepare travel documents and making a travel plan that can cover the essence of Xizang.

"The second day after the arrival in Lhasa, we visited the Xizang Museum," Chan said. "The most exciting thing was that a ceremony called sutra debate was held at the museum, giving us a glimpse into the unique features of Tibetan Buddhism."

Chan learned that sutra debate

has been an essential part of the training of monks since the time of the first Buddhist monasteries in Xizang, and has been carried forward as a tradition of Buddhist heritage to the present day. In the debate, the main intention is to defeat misconceptions on the philosophy of the Buddhist scriptures and to establish and maintain a defensible point of view.

In the following days, Chan and other tour members also visited Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple and Barkor Street in Lhasa; Yamdrok Yutso

Lake and Karula Glacier in Lhokha; Tashilhunpo Monastery and Mount Qomolangma base camp in Shigatse; and Nam Co Lake in the boundary area between Lhasa and Nagchu.

"This is a classic itinerary for a short-term journey because it has covered the representative aspects of culture, life and nature in Xizang," Chan said.

On his social media account, Chan gave a brief and exact introduction of these places:

"Potala Palace is the holy site of Tibetan Buddhism and a landmark of Lhasa; Jokhang Temple is among the earliest monasteries in Lhasa; and Barkor Street is the busiest commercial street in Lhasa. Nam Co and Yamdrok Yutso are among the three holy lakes in Xizang. And Mount Qomolangma base camp is the best location to view the highest mountain in the world ..."

He said the journey cost him less than 10,000 yuan, including about 6,000 yuan paid to the travel agency to cover such expenses as tickets, lodging, tour guide service and transportation in Xizang. The journey between Beijing and Lhasa, including a plane and a train trip, cost him more than 3,000 yuan.

"The spending means this is an absolutely cost-effective trip," Chan said.

### Overseas influx

For veteran traveler Vladimir Poda, Xizang is a place worth many visits in one's lifetime.

After hearing the news that Xizang would reopen to foreign tourists in 2023, All Ways International, a US-based travel agency that Poda works with, wasted no time in putting advertisements on its social media platforms and contacting clients.

The company organized its first group of 11 foreign travelers for a tour to the autonomous region in late May 2023.

The tour comprised mostly Russians and people from European countries, according to Poda, an American-Russian who works as an organizer of tourist groups for the company.

Poda's first tour of Xizang was in 2013, with a group of around 20 people, mostly Russian-speakers from several countries. He has visited Xizang nine times in the past decade.

"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many foreign travelers had to cancel their plans to visit Xizang in the past three years, and some have been eager to tour the region," Poda said.

Xizang suspended inbound tourism in February 2020, in accordance with the policies of China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism which aimed to curb the COVID-19 pandemic.

There has been an influx of foreign travelers into Xizang since the autonomous region reopened its tourism industry to the outside world in April 2023. More than 13,000 foreign tourists visited in July that year.

On Aug 8, 2023, another tourist group organized by Poda arrived in the autonomous region.

"We visited Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple, and Drakyerpa Monastery ... and we also visited a Tibetan village near Drakyerpa Monastery to get a glimpse of local people's life," he said. "What I like the most are Jokhang Temple and Potala Palace in Lhasa. I like them very much."

Poda added that he prefers to stay in simple hotels, rather than fancy ones, as long as they have good locations from which to observe the culture and nature of Xizang.

"We just visited Drakyerpa, there are many meditation caves, which meant a lot for me, because I practice meditation and yoga," he said.

"I also like to worship the sacred Mount Kailash with a circumambulating trip as the Tibetans and the Indians do."

Pilgrims from several religions believe that circumambulating Mount Kailash on foot is a holy ritual that will bring good fortune.

# Xizang's charms power high-quality growth



Animal husbandry (left) and highland barley farming are among the advantageous agricultural sectors in Xizang autonomous region. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Autonomous region leveraging culture, unique advantages to boost development of industries

By YUAN SHENGGAO

To foster new quality productive forces and boost high-quality growth, Southwest China's Xizang autonomous region has made great strides in promoting the development of nine industries with distinctive local characteristics and comparative advantages.

The nine sectors are farming and animal husbandry with plateau characteristics; clean energy; green industries; the high-tech digital economy; cultural tourism; modern services; Tibetan medicine; border trade and logistics; and general aviation.

According to local officials, the nine industries have each reached a considerable scale and have featured ever-improving efficiency.

The farming and husbandry industry is among the traditional economic pillars in Xizang. Through unwavering commitment to growing highland barley and other staple crops; and developing husbandry segments relating to yaks, sheep, pigs and chickens, Xizang has seen a steady improvement of its rural economy and the livelihoods of rural residents.

In the first three quarters of this year, the autonomous region's added value in the farming and husbandry sector reached 13.91 billion yuan, growing 14.9 percent from the same period of last year. The rate was 11.5 percentage points higher than the national average.

The per capita disposable income of rural residents reached 13,547 yuan during the same period, up 8.2 percent year-on-year. The growth rate ranked it second nationwide.

In Phari township of Dromo county in Shigatse city, for instance, the local yak farming industry has seen robust growth thanks to a new operational model and increasing investment in technological research.

Local resident Phurjung is now a member at a rural cooperative called Phari Yaks Industry with his yaks as the stake. "We find that the cooperative is an effective way to improve efficiency and increase profits, as it can help to address many of our concerns in operations, like breeding research, farming management, investment in equipment and market expansion," Phurjung said.

Xizang is seeing rapid development in the clean energy industry because of its rich hydraulic, geothermal, wind and solar power resources. At present, 95 percent of Xizang's electricity is generated from clean energy facilities. The rate ranks it among the top of the nation.

The Sanxia Tsomai Trigu Wind Farm, located in Trigu township of Tsomai county, is among the largest wind power facilities in Xizang. Since beginning operation on Aug 3, 2023, the wind farm has generated a total of 370 million kilowatt-hours of electricity, which can meet the electricity demands of about 140,000 households.

In addition to the Tsomai wind farm, a great number of hydraulic, wind, solar and geothermal power



Clockwise from top left: A visitor tries on a wearable device at a local expo to experience the latest digital technologies developed by Xizang. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY A female pilot at Snow Eagle returns after a helicopter mission. PURBU TASHI / XINHUA A Pakistani exhibitor showcases his wares at a trade fair in Lhasa. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY A solar farm in Lhokha city. SONG WEIXING / FOR CHINA DAILY



Vegetable farming in greenhouses is now a characteristic agricultural sector in Shigatse, as well as other regions in Xizang. LIU HE / XINHUA

plants have been completed in Xizang, making the autonomous region a major supplier of green electricity in the country.

Local statistics show that, Xizang has supplied about 20 billion kWh of green electricity to the rest of the country to date.

As Xizang is located on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, which features a fragile ecological environment, promoting the development of green industries is crucial for local sustainable development.

In Xizang, the green industries include such sectors as green building materials, bottled water, farming products processing and high-tech manufacturing.

In the first three quarters of this year, the total fixed asset investment in Xizang's green industries reached 13.07 billion yuan. The industrial enterprises above designated scale in the sectors reported a year-on-year growth rate of 18.8 percent, ranking first in the country.

A prominent feature in the sectors is that industrial players have made it a commitment to implement the green development principle in their full process of operations.

Xiangjiang Industries Corp

based in Ngari prefecture, for instance, is a producer of bottled mineral water. While upgrading itself into a modern manufacturer through investing in automation and digitalization, the company has also been making efforts in sustainable development through promoting clean and eco-friendly production, conservation of energy and recycled use of resources.

In Xizang, the digital economy is an emerging economic form alongside the real economy sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing and it is empowering the real economy.

Over recent years, Xizang has seen rapid development of the digital economy with the promotion of digital industrialization and industrial digitalization.

Statistics show that Xizang's digital economy has kept an average annual growth rate of more than 14 percent over the past three years. In the first three quarters of this year, the added value of the autonomous region's digital economy reached 20.2 billion yuan.

A remarkable feature of Xizang's digital economy is that local players are actively promoting the deep integration of new-generation infor-

mation technologies, like big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence, with economic and social development.

Boasting spectacular natural and cultural wonders, Xizang stands as a favored destination among tourists from the rest of the country and the world. And tourism has been a traditional economic pillar in the autonomous region.

In the first nine months of this year, Xizang received more than 57 million tourist visits from home and abroad, garnering more than 67 billion yuan in tourism revenue.

Xizang's tourism industry is now more commonly known as cultural tourism because of the deep integration of culture and tourism. Tourism operators in Xizang are now focusing on delving into local historical cultural heritage, aiming to improve tourist experiences through presenting the local traditions, customs and lives in innovative ways.

For instance, the "Kelsang Flower Performing Season", a monthslong cultural festival, has been staged in various cities and areas in Xizang since late March. The performances comprise a drama called Old Xizang, an ethnic music concert and other shows for adults and children,

aiming to present the region's multifaceted local cultures and lives to audiences.

The event's organizers said a total of 84 shows have been held throughout the autonomous region, attracting audiences of more than 66,000 offline and about 3.65 million viewers online.

Recognizing the crucial role of the service industry in supporting socioeconomic development, the Xizang autonomous region is stepping up efforts to promote the growth of the sector and has achieved remarkable achievements.

Statistics show that, the region's service-providing entities above designated scale — or enterprises with annual business revenue of more than 10 million yuan — reported a combined operational revenue of 23.96 billion yuan during the first eight months of this year.

Xizang is modernizing its service industry through digitalization, especially the use of big data, cloud computing and the internet of things. The move has led to the booming development of e-commerce and smart governance in both urban and rural areas.

Tsering Gangtso, who owns a grocery store in Nagchu's Tsoni district,

now finds livestreaming and e-commerce can be of great help in drawing in customers and increasing sales.

"When I began livestreaming a year ago, there were only several viewers once," Tsering Gangtso said. "And now the number grows to more than 14,000, resulting in substantial growth in both offline and online sales."

Tibetan medicine, as an important part of traditional Chinese medicine, is entering a new era of high-quality development thanks to the local authorities' efforts to promote the sector's modernization and industrialization.

The autonomous region's 17 major Tibetan medicine producers registered a combined output value of more than 2.5 billion yuan during the first nine months of this year.

The local authorities and industry players are trying to extend the Tibetan medicine industry chain by integrating it with culture, tourism and wellness industries. This integration has helped Tibetan medicine win popularity among consumers in the rest of the country and the world and also increased people's awareness in protecting this precious cultural asset.

Bordering several countries in South Asia, Xizang plays an important role in China's opening-up.

With enhanced investment in cross-border land port construction, Xizang has seen steady growth in its foreign trade business over the recent years. During the first three quarters of this year, Xizang's import and export value reached 8.44 billion yuan, increasing 10.2 percent year-on-year.

Cross-border trade and logistics are the dominant form of Xizang's foreign trade and land ports in border areas are the important channels for imports and exports.

Over recent years, the State and the autonomous region have made heavy investments in the construction of land port facilities.

Ten projects relating to land port infrastructure construction, with a combined investment of 350 million yuan, have been completed this year, which are expected to substantially facilitate cross-border trade.

The general aviation industry, which features operations other than passenger or cargo transportation on regular basis, is an emerging sector in Xizang in response to the demands of transporting people and cargo in a sparsely populated region.

Xizang general aviation industry now covers such operations as rescue, forest care, air patrol, air tours and logistics. The operations are conducted by such aircraft as jets, light planes, helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles.

Founded in 2016, Lhasa-based Snow Eagle General Aviation was among the first general aviation companies in Xizang. The company now has a large fleet of helicopters to offer tailored services to business clients and tourists.

It is renowned among tourists because of its offering of air tours starting from Lhasa and reaching destinations like Yangdrok Yutso and Nam Co.

"We were also one of the local pioneers in such services as aerial medical and emergency rescues, aerial patrols, forestry spraying and various chartered services," said Lyu Jin, general manager of Snow Eagle.

## WORLDUS

## Dialogue and trust stressed in Sino-US ties

Cooperation, broadening engagement needed to address challenges, experts say

By YIFAN XU in Washington  
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US experts weighed in on China's annual Central Economic Work Conference, highlighting the implications of a robust Chinese economy for its global influence. They emphasized the importance of US-China cooperation in addressing global challenges, calling for rebuilding trust and multilevel constructive dialogue between the two nations.

In his speech at the conference held in Beijing earlier this month, President Xi Jinping summarized the economic work in 2024, analyzed the current economic situation, and arranged the economic work for 2025.

The policymakers at the conference noted the heightened negative factors from the outside environment and challenges facing the economy, and reaffirmed the need to

forge ahead with high-quality development, comprehensively deepen reform, expand high-level opening-up, and develop a modern industrial system.

"Both the US and China will ultimately be better off if they can reduce the potential for conflict and can engage one another in a much more constructive way," Denis Simon, a nonresident fellow at the Quincy Institute and senior lecturer in the Asian Pacific Studies Institute at Duke University, told China Daily.

Simon said a healthy economy is crucial not only for China's domestic stability but also for its global standing. "China's role in the world is strengthened by having a strong, vibrant economy and also at the same time by having a dynamic innovation system," he said, mentioning China's shift to a more proactive fiscal policy and a moderately loose monetary policy next year, signaled

“The challenge for the new (US) administration is to reverse the downward spiral in trust and create space for meaningful dialogue.”

Denis Simon, senior lecturer in the Asian Pacific Studies Institute at Duke University

by the tone-setting conference.

"The changes will spur the Chinese economy, and they should dampen the negative commentary in the Western press," said Gary Clyde Hufbauer, a nonresident senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Simon hoped China would take measures to boost the economy and get "tangible results" in the next six

to 12 months.

He emphasized the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between the US and China. "The narrative that China is trying to displace the US as a global leader is simply not supported by facts," Simon said.

"My hope is that these remarks (from the annual Central Economic Work Conference) portend a welcome mat for investment by Western firms," Hufbauer said.

However, building a cooperative relationship requires overcoming existing hurdles. Paul Triolo, the senior vice-president at Albright Stonebridge Group, stressed the need to rebuild trust and broaden engagement beyond the presidential level.

"The challenge for the new (US) administration is to reverse the downward spiral in trust and create space for meaningful dialogue," he told China Daily.

Triolo mentioned the complexities within the US political landscape; while some advocate a confrontational approach toward China,

others favor greater engagement, suggesting more cabinet-level and working-level dialogues.

Triolo said the incoming administration of Donald Trump will likely adopt a more balanced approach toward China policy, with Wall Street and Silicon Valley voices gaining more influence.

"Trump likes to have Wall Street people around him because he is very concerned about the business community and about the stock market," he said, pointing out that President-elect Trump is very "transactional" and would always want "a deal".

Triolo said, though, that the US-China relationship cannot be solely focused on narrow areas of agreement. "China wants to see a broader relationship," he said, adding they should be talking about big issues, including global issues, climate change and other things where collaboration could exist.

The recent dialogue between US and Chinese officials, such as the US-China Economic Working Group

meeting on Dec 16 and the US-China Financial Working Group meeting on Dec 15-16, could be seen as positive steps toward broader engagement and cooperation.

Triolo also highlighted the potential for collaboration between the two major powers on global issues such as climate change and AI safety. "The US and China are key drivers of the global economy," he said, "and they have a shared responsibility to work together on these big issues".

Triolo said the US export controls on technology have created a "difficult problem" even though Chinese companies would prefer to "remain very much engaged" with the global economy.

Triolo said the challenge early in the Trump administration regarding US-China relations would be "if there were some steps toward reversing that downward spiral in trust".

He also emphasized the need for a more comprehensive and nuanced China policy from the Trump administration.



Angela Chen (second left) with fellow board members at the New York Philharmonic Lunar New Year Gala celebrating the Year of the Rabbit in 2023. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

## NY Philharmonic to honor philanthropist

By MINGMEI LI in New York  
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For 13 years, Chinese-American philanthropist Angela Chen has been a staunch supporter of the New York Philharmonic's popular Chinese New Year concert.

The philharmonic is set to celebrate Spring Festival and the Year of the Snake, which marks one of the 12 signs of the Chinese zodiac, at its annual gala on Feb 11, 2025.

The event will honor Chen, a board member and co-chair of the orchestra's International Advisory Board. Chen, who started the orchestra's New Year concert tradition, has spent decades promoting Chinese music and culture abroad as a Chinese-American philanthropist working "behind the scenes". Chen will be the first Chinese-American to receive the honor at the philharmonic.

Unlike traditional musicians,

Chen uses her business skills to support the New York Philharmonic, which is the oldest orchestra of its kind in the US, through fundraising, attracting local and international business entrepreneurs and leaders together, turning the Chinese New Year concert into one of the orchestra's key annual events. Her work has helped bring broader recognition to Chinese New Year and Chinese culture with not only traditions and diversity but also ancient and modern cultures.

"Concerts are a mainstream platform that local US people can easily engage with, naturally sparking their interest in learning more about Chinese culture," Chen told China Daily in an exclusive interview.

"I hope this concert brings together traditional and modern music, showing more people the beauty and depth of Chinese culture. I'd love for it to become

a lasting tradition in mainstream American society."

"We don't just present mainstream Chinese music; we also include music from ethnic minorities to show China's diversity and inclusiveness," she said. "Sharing Chinese culture helps more people understand China and builds deeper connections between China and the US."

Musical exchanges like the Philadelphia Orchestra's visit to China in 1973 have helped strengthen US-China relations and "even now, despite the challenges in US-China relations, events like concerts can still play a positive role," Chen added.

Besides musical elements, Chen said she wanted to incorporate more Chinese traditions, such as lion dances, dragon dances, Chinese calligraphy, and zodiac-themed balloon decorations, creating an immersive experience for

the audience.

Music helps people abroad better understand Chinese culture while also allowing Chinese people to experience foreign culture through symphony, she said.

"Chinese New Year embodies the values of family reunion, respect for elders, and mutual affection. Through the Chinese New Year concert, we hope to help more Americans understand the traditional values of Chinese culture," Chen said.

Usually working behind the scenes, Chen said she felt proud to receive the award not for fame but for the recognition of her efforts to bridge cultural gaps. She also hoped to see more members of the younger generation joining her.

"Chinese communities abroad should stick together more to have a stronger voice," she said. "Being proud of our own culture will also help us gain more recognition and respect from others."

## Trump backs Musk in work-visa debate

WEST PALM BEACH, Florida — US President-elect Donald Trump on Saturday sided with key supporter and billionaire tech CEO Elon Musk in a public dispute over the use of the H-1B visa, saying he fully backs the program for foreign tech workers opposed by some of his supporters.

Trump's remarks followed a series of social media posts from Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, who vowed late on Friday to go to "war" to defend the visa program for foreign tech workers.

Trump, who moved to limit the visas' use during his first presidency, told The New York Post on Saturday he was in favor of the visa program.

"I have many H-1B visas on my

properties. I've been a believer in H-1B. I have used it many times. It's a great program," he was quoted as saying.

Musk, a naturalized US citizen born in South Africa, has held an H-1B visa, and his electric car company Tesla obtained 724 of the visas this year. H-1B visas are typically for three years, though holders can extend them or apply for green cards.

The altercation was set off earlier last week by far-right activists who criticized Trump's selection of Sri-ram Krishnan, an Indian American venture capitalist, to be an adviser on artificial intelligence, saying he would have influence on the Trump administration's immigration policies.

## Skilled immigrants

Musk's tweet was directed at Trump's supporters and immigration hard-liners who have increasingly pushed for the H-1B visa program to be scrapped amid a heated debate over immigration and the place of skilled immigrants and foreign workers brought into the country on work visas.

On Friday, Steve Bannon, a Trump strategist, criticized "big tech oligarchs" for supporting the H-1B program and cast immigration as a threat to Western civilization.

In response, Musk and other tech billionaires drew a line between what they view as legal immigration and illegal immigration.

Trump's insistent calls for sharp curbs on immigration were central to his election victory last month over Vice-President Kamala Harris. Trump has vowed to deport all undocumented immigrants and limit legal immigration.

But tech leaders such as Musk — as well as Vivek Ramaswamy, who is set to co-chair a government cost-cutting panel with Musk — say the United States produces too few highly skilled graduates, and they fervently champion the H-1B program.

The US tech industry relies on the government's H-1B visa program to hire foreign skilled workers to help run its companies, a labor force that critics say undercuts wages for US citizens.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

## Ping-Pong Diplomacy anniversary celebrated

By RENALI in Los Angeles  
renali@chinadailyusa.com

A group of officials, table tennis enthusiasts and community leaders recently gathered to celebrate the 53rd anniversary of Ping-Pong Diplomacy, with its legacy remaining a powerful testament to the impact of small, meaningful gestures in fostering global understanding and collaboration.

The group in Los Angeles reflected on how a simple act of sportsmanship during a tense period in history became the spark that transformed Sino-US relations.

Sheri Cioroslan, president of the US Table Tennis Association Foundation and former president of USA Table Tennis, recounted the historical events related to the anniversary and emphasized the pivotal role of the sport in reestablishing diplomatic ties between the United States and China.

The story began in 1971, when Chinese table tennis player Zhuang Zedong extended a gesture of friendship to US athlete Glenn Cowan, who had mistakenly boarded the Chinese team's bus during a match in Japan. Their brief exchange became a symbol of mutual goodwill during a time of Cold War tensions, with the unexpected encounter setting the stage for a groundbreaking series of events, championed by visionary leaders from both nations.

Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, alongside US officials, had seized the opportunity to leverage the sporting connection. They arranged visits by the Chinese and US table tennis teams, demonstrating the potential for dialogue and cooperation.

"Fifty-three years after Ping-Pong Diplomacy, we always have to keep this friendship together," Cioroslan told China Daily.

"Because we remain the common thread, no matter how much tension there is, we're always the group of people to recommend peaceful events, people-to-people exchanges and a lot of activity together."

In April 1971, a group of nine US table tennis players embarked on a milestone journey to China, marking the beginning of what was known as

Ping-Pong Diplomacy. Among them was Connie Sweeris, one of the athletes who participated in the transformative trip. She recalled the experience as not just a sports exchange, but a bridge-building endeavor that transcended politics.

"We were just athletes playing table tennis, but we became symbols of something much larger," Sweeris told China Daily.

Along with her teammates, Sweeris toured Beijing and engaged in friendly matches with their Chinese counterparts.

## Unique role

Reflecting on the enduring impact of Ping-Pong Diplomacy, Sweeris emphasized that the younger generation has a unique role in opening lines of communication and promoting mutual understanding between nations.

"When you have people-to-people exchanges like we did in 1971, it's crucial to carry that forward to today's younger generation," Sweeris said.

Chinese Consul General in Los Angeles Guo Shaochun, who presented the China-US Ping-Pong Diplomacy Contribution Awards to the Sweeris couple at the celebration, noted that over the past 45 years, despite the ups and downs in the relationship between the two countries, their ties have always continued to progress.

Gene Sykes, chairman of the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee, who was also honored at the awards, said that the impact of Ping-Pong Diplomacy went "far beyond sports" — it opened doors for future collaborations and exchanges that continue to shape the relationship today.

Edward Cai, president of the All American Chinese Association behind the commemoration, said: "Events like this remind us to keep communication open and find common ground to strengthen the bond between our nations."

Paying tribute to the legacy, Congresswoman Judy Chu highlighted that the exchange went beyond sportsmanship, serving as a powerful reminder of the human connections that can foster diplomacy and, ultimately, contribute to trade relations today.

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## COMMENT



China and the World Roundtable | 2025 Outlook

**Editor's note:** It is expected that the global economy and geopolitical situation will face increasing complexity and uncertainties in 2025. How will the global economy develop in 2025? Five experts share their views on the issue with China Daily.

## The five critical questions for 2025



Alan Ballard, the former director of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and chair of New Zealand Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference

## Can China's 'miracle economy' continue?

This year China has tried to promote growth with a huge boost in production and exports. This prompts us to recall Napoleon's words that when China wakes she will shake the world. Exports' growth has been so strong that Europe and the US have felt their own businesses are being threatened, and political forces in the United States have taken the opportunity to label China as a "strategic danger", with targeted sanctions and defensive industry policy to encourage domestic companies. There has been economic retaliation from China, and now all sides are worried about impending trade wars in 2025.

Students used to listen to professors and lecturers telling them how they could improve the world. But now the teaching curricula are moving from David Ricardo's "win-win" trade policies to US President-elect Donald Trump's "win-lose" approach. This includes defensive policies guarding against competitors and aggressive policies to actively damage them. From neo-mercantilism to the weaponization of money, it changes trade relationships and will be a theme for the coming year.

Therefore, China will continue its policies of moving production inland in 2025 to use cheaper domestic labor and establishing supply chains along the overland Belt and Road destinations. This will be closely watched by ASEAN member states which have been reassessing whether their interests are to keep supplying China, or to actively compete with it.

So far the Southern Hemisphere resource suppliers (Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Peru) have enjoyed strong commodity prices and cheap imports of green technology from China, but they are also watching China's policy anxiously.

One big question for Chinese economists in 2025 will be: if the world keeps moving to win-lose policies, should China respond or should it try to lead countries in reasserting open trade?

Another big question for 2025 is how to move to a new growth pathway. First year economics students will recall the famous equation of aggregate demand:  $Y = C + I + G + (X - M)$ . In English, this means GDP is the total of domestic consumption plus business investment plus government expenditure plus the trade balance. In practice, however, economic growth is far more complex, but this simple equation serves to describe different development strategies.

Under China's "miracle economy" strategy, the economic driver was exports driven by strong investment, with government expenditure focused on infrastructure and policy focused on industry promotion. Western economies may all be unhappy in their own ways, but they do all demonstrate much higher consumption, and their government spending is more oriented toward social expenditure. This means they have more scope to use macroeconomic policies (fiscal, monetary and macro-financial policies) to promote stabilization, demand management and growth.

The Chinese government (most recently at the Central Economic Work Conference this month) has said it would like to move further on this path in 2025, and the financial markets agree, but it is proving difficult.

Despite Chinese consumers' famous digital retail habits, so far they have mainly invested in apartments. While savings remain strong, trade surpluses are still growing and unwanted deflationary pressures persist. The year 2025 will be a test: can the Chinese economy continue to move from old "miracle growth" to a modern consumer-led economy in these darker times? Expect more policy announcements!



Klaus F. Zimmermann, a professor at the Free University of Berlin and the president of the Global Labor Organization, a Germany-based worldwide network of researchers investigating the path of globalization

## Will there be another global trade war in 2025?

Flourishing trade relationships between countries are crucial to the international division of labor and welfare. With forthcoming political changes in the United States and Europe, the trade disputes between China, the US and the European Union may become a closely watched global issue.

But will this conflict culminate in another global trade war by 2025, potentially triggering a major economic crisis? Or can a balance between cooperation and confrontation be achieved?

Recent political shifts in the US and the EU, particularly in Italy, France and Germany, have rendered the "Western" world more conservative, nationalistic, and less focused on globalization. Political agendas are overshadowing economic logic. Consequently, China is frequently viewed as a trade powerhouse endangering economic well-being. Incoming US president Donald Trump has proposed significant tariffs on Chinese and EU imports to reduce US trade deficits with these economies.

The EU is urged to increase its oil and gas imports from the US. Regarding China, targeted industries encompass those vital to national security, such as semiconductors, rare earth minerals, and pharmaceuticals, with additional measures controlling sensitive technologies, including artificial intelligence and quantum computing.

The US revoking its "most favored nation" status for China could be a significant initial move.

Trade disputes between China and the EU are mainly focused on the electric vehicle sector, with Europe, particularly Germany, losing its dominance in the car industry. The EU accuses China of unfair trade practices, including company subsidies.

Latin America is another area of trade competition and dispute. The EU-Mercosur agreement, signed by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in early December, is a major trade agreement involving the EU and Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay). This treaty aims to reduce tariffs and trade barriers, anticipating welfare gains for both regions.

China has funded a new deep-water port in Chancay, Peru, under the Belt and Road Initiative. This port is expected to significantly boost trade between South America and Asia, while also facilitating trade into South America.

As for Trump, he has warned Panama that the Panama Canal, a crucial route for global sea freight, should not fall into the "wrong hands". Additionally, the US is displeased with the Mercosur agreement, as it intensifies competition with the EU.

Anticipating trade conflicts in 2025, China aims to boost domestic demand and industrial upgrading while avoiding structural reforms to mitigate new economic risks while the EU might counter US tariffs by diversifying energy sources, increasing tariffs on US goods and services (such as the Digital Service Tax on imported software services), and pursuing trade partners in regions such as Mercosur, Africa, and the "Indo-Pacific". EU countries need to swiftly ratify the Mercosur agreement, though internal criticism persists as Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands stand to benefit more than France and Belgium.

Investing in negotiations to minimize or avoid trade war damages is beneficial for global welfare. Respecting national cultures, strategies, and borders is essential to prevent political dominance and achieve these gains. Balancing security and economic policy objectives has grown increasingly important. Failing this, greater autonomy, diversified supply chains, and a focus on trading with allied nations would be the only alternative. With this common understanding, a global agreement among major trade players appears feasible.



Tang Yonghong, a professor at the Taiwan Research Center, Xiamen University

## Can cross-Strait ties ease?

As 2024 comes to a close, the Taiwan Strait remains a focal point in geopolitics,



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

with tensions remaining high. The year unfolded as expected, marked by intensified confrontation and strained cross-Strait exchanges. The factors that contributed to the existing situation include a slowing global economy, sluggish cross-Strait economic growth, the restrictive and provocative policies of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party toward the Chinese mainland, and Washington's desperate attempts to contain Beijing's rise.

Despite these challenges, the mainland has maintained a firm grip on cross-Strait dynamics, leveraging its robust economy, huge market size and commitment to peaceful reunification.

The mainland has been exploring new pathways for cross-Strait integration, implementing equal treatment policies and establishing cooperation pilot zones. Many Taiwan residents have started realizing the risks of the DPP's provocative actions and the opportunities available on the mainland. The rising number of Taiwan residents applying to settle in the mainland reflects this shift, highlighting growing public dissatisfaction with the DPP's policies.

Looking ahead, the cross-Strait situation in 2025 is likely to be increasingly complex. Under the leadership of "Taiwan independence" advocate Lai Ching-te, the DPP is expected to continue pushing its agenda, bolstered by external anti-Beijing forces. And the US new administration may continue to use Taiwan as a strategic pawn. This interplay of internal and external forces could further raise cross-Strait tensions and complicate Sino-US relations.

The cross-Strait situation is one of structural contradictions. The DPP's refusal to accept the 1992 Consensus that there is only one China, combined with its "Taiwan independence" agenda, reflects the island's changing sociopolitical landscape. Polls show that while most Taiwan residents favor maintaining the status quo, a significant percentage thinks otherwise. This ideological shift has deepened cross-Strait divisions, prompting the DPP to adopt an adversarial stance toward Beijing.

On the other hand, the US is likely to continue playing the "Taiwan card" to contain Beijing's rise. While reaffirming that it adheres to the one-China principle, Washington has been trying to normalize interactions with Taiwan through legislation and unofficial exchanges. Moves such as the deployment of US troops in Taiwan, hosting joint meetings, and pushing for "dual recognition" will all be regarded as blatant provocations to test Beijing's red line.

However, the US is expected to balance its actions, avoiding steps that could lead to a direct conflict or risks of severance of ties with China.

The "Taiwan independence" agenda faces significant limitations. The island's defense capabilities remain weak, and Taiwan residents are generally opposed to war. Additionally, the US is unlikely to militarily

conflict could still escalate in the long run, endangering the security of the whole of Europe.

And fourth, when the US reduces or stops its aid to Ukraine, European countries may step forward and increase their material support to Ukraine. In such a scenario, the Russia-Ukraine conflict could see a long period of stalemate and war of attrition. But in the end, a seriously "de-industrialized" Russia, may be unable to break the resilience of Ukraine, whose military production is on the right track.

History shows that peace can be long lasting only when it is based on fairness.



Hou Yuxiang, a professor at the School of Middle Eastern Studies, Beijing International Studies University

## Will the chaos intensify in the Middle East?

The Middle East is caught in a spiral of violence and geopolitical games. The Israel-Palestine conflict intensified after Hamas launched the "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation against Israel on Oct 7, 2023, triggering a chain reaction in the Middle East in 2024, including the sudden regime change in Syria.

As such, the Middle East is likely to remain volatile thanks to the international community's ineffectiveness in mediating peace, the intense power game in the region, and the armed conflict in Syria.

While Hamas and Israel are playing the blame game over the delay in declaring truce in Gaza, a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah hangs in the balance. Also, Israel captured Syria's Golan Heights after Bashar al-Assad's government fell, and the temporary ceasefire in the Palestine-Israel conflict is on the verge of a breakdown. On the other hand, Yemen is caught in a civil war, and the unrest in Iraq continues.

All this suggests the Middle East may see more frequent armed conflicts in 2025, characterized by multiple forces' interventions in the region.

In fact, the great power games, including global and regional power rivalries, will emerge from behind the scenes to occupy center stage. The United States, Russia and European Union are engaged in the major global power games either directly or through proxy warfare.

But since US President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to stop the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the US' presence in the Middle East, including more direct "face-to-face" engagement with different parties, will intensify.

Regional powers such as Israel and Turkey will continue to increase their gains in the Middle East hot wars, with the drastic change in Syria giving Turkey a chance to expand its influence in the region and challenge Iran. In fact, Syria may become a hot spot in the Middle East, while the development gap among Middle East countries will continue to widen.

In the further polarization of Middle East development, one group of countries advocate for economic diversification, reducing dependence on oil and implementing reforms.

Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and North African countries represented by Morocco are likely to harvest the fruits of development through deepening reform, probably in new energy, tourism and financial services.

The other group comprises countries that are severely affected by war and side effects of the great power game, such as Libya, Syria and Iraq. But if Syria is caught in a civil war, the chances of extremist forces re-emerging will increase.

Besides, there is a great risk of spillover effects from the Iran nuclear issue. Dealing with the Middle East problems is extremely difficult because of religious and ethnic complexities, economic and social issues, and intensive great power games.

While the peace prospects in the Middle East appear dim, the international community, including China, is committed to promoting peace in the Middle East through diplomatic means in 2025. So people worldwide should remain hopeful and make efforts to promote peace.

The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

## COMMENT

## Editorials

## China stresses the Middle East needs to be free of external interference for peace and stability

Despite the fact that Iran is sanctioned by the United States and some other Western countries, China firmly believes that its normal cooperation and trade with Iran are those with a good friend and partner to the benefit of the two peoples. The two sides firmly support each other in safeguarding their respective core interests and have taken their mutual trust to a new level.

In a meeting with his Iranian counterpart Abbas Araghchi in the Chinese capital on Saturday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged Beijing's further cooperation with Teheran.

He also voiced Beijing's commitment to supporting Teheran within multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS.

In the meeting, both ministers agreed that the solution to the Palestinian issue requires respect for and restoration of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and an end to Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip.

Both ministers also agreed that an immediate ceasefire, a full withdrawal of troops, and urgent humanitarian assistance are imperative. The ceasefire agreement in Lebanon must be implemented effectively and efficiently.

This has long been China's stand on the solution to the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

China believes that the unrest in the Middle East has a lot to do with the intervention of external forces, which have placed their own geopolitical interests above the rights and interests of local people.

A lack of respect for the will of local people and for the cultural traditions and religion, which are the foundation for the political systems of regional countries, has prompted external interference in different ways that has led to continuous military conflicts in the region.

The invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003 is a case in point. Instead of wiping out the root causes of terrorism, the war that was launched on made-up evidence of the Iraqi regime possessing weapons of mass destruction resulted in the rise of the Islamic State terrorist organization, which brought widespread suffering to the region.

That explains why China has sent Middle East envoys time and again to seek political solutions to the animosities instead of directly getting involved in the affairs of specific countries there.

The Middle East belongs to its people and should not serve as a battleground for big power games or a victim of geopolitical rivalries, as the two parties said in a joint statement released by the Chinese Foreign Ministry following Saturday's meeting.

"The future and destiny of Middle Eastern countries should be determined by the people of the region themselves," the statement said. "The international community must respect their sovereignty, security, stability, unity, and territorial integrity."

The civil war would not have taken place in Syria without the interference of some big powers in its internal affairs.

As far as the situation in Syria is concerned, with the fall of the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria, China hopes that the new regime will find a political solution to restore stability and order as soon as possible.

The Syrian people have suffered too much and for too long during the protracted civil war. All relevant parties should do their utmost to promote peace in Syria and the reconstruction of the war-torn country for the well-being of the Syrian people. The same is true for the Palestinian people, and the people in Lebanon.

The China-brokered reconciliation deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023 that concluded the seven years of tensions between the two Gulf countries should serve as a strong example that talks can effectively ease tensions and produce a political settlement of disputes or conflict between countries.

China will unswervingly continue to advocate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the region being respected and the settlement of disputes as well as conflicts through talks.

As long as all parties have enough patience and determination to seek political solutions, there is hope for lasting peace in the Middle East. China will continue to make unremitting efforts in this regard.

China has always given high priority to its relations with countries in the region, which occupies an important position in China's foreign relations. No matter how the international situation changes, China's neutral stance and willingness to strengthen cooperation with countries in the region will remain unchanged.

## Probe into industry's beef with imports justified

The World Trade Organization rules permit investigatory authorities to initiate a safeguard investigation upon the application of a domestic industry if an increase in the import volume of a product causes or threatens to cause substantial damage to the domestic industry.

The safeguard investigation into imported beef that the Chinese Commerce Ministry launched under the WTO rules on Friday is in response to an application submitted by the China Animal Agriculture Association and nine industry associations from major beef-producing regions of the country on behalf of the domestic beef industry, the ministry said in a statement.

The applicants for the probe claim that the volume of beef imports has risen sharply over the last five years, growing 106.28 percent in the first half of 2024 compared to the same period in 2019, saying that the sharp increase in beef imports in recent years "has had a significant adverse impact on the domestic industry", the ministry said in a statement.

The large amount of imported beef is undoubtedly "adding insult to injury" pushing down the price of beef products in the Chinese market to the lowest in years and leaving about 65 percent of domestic cattle breeders suffering from long-term losses, the China Animal Agriculture Association said in a statement.

The applicants assert that the sharp increase in imports has significantly impacted China's domestic industry, which has experienced substantial damage, and a causal relationship exists between the damage and the rise in imports. The purpose of the investigation is therefore to verify the authenticity of the claim and then decide what measures to take, if necessary.

The probe, which does not target any specific countries or regions or differentiate products based on origin, will examine bovine meat imported from Jan 1, 2019, to June 30, 2024. It is expected to conclude within eight months, although it may be extended under special circumstances.

Relevant countries' beef trade with China will not be affected during the investigation period, and the investigatory authorities will conduct their work in accordance with the law and make an objective and impartial ruling based on the results of their investigation. To that end, China is willing to maintain communication with all parties, engage in friendly consultations, address mutual concerns, and work collaboratively to safeguard the healthy, stable international trade in beef products.

As a senior analyst of the beef industry of the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Zhu Cong, pointed out, China has always been relatively open to beef imports, as long as they meet relevant standards, except for some epidemic restrictions. However, in the past two years, because some countries have relatively low breeding costs and provide some subsidies to their industry, the gap with domestic prices is relatively large, Zhu told the media in a recent interview on the investigation.

This has had a significant impact on the domestic market, so the current investigation is a "reasonable" trade relief measure, he noted.

According to data released by the WTO, 55 members of the world trade body have launched safeguard investigations since 1995, resulting in 437 cases, covering 18 major categories of products including agricultural and nonagricultural products. China has so far only launched two safeguard investigations, one into steel imports and one into imports of sugar.

Because beef production has a time cycle, the probe will necessarily have the effect of stabilizing expectations for the domestic beef industry in the coming months, while leaving relevant parties enough time to adjust their operation. China's domestic beef supply is in a period of temporary oversupply, and the next one to two years will be an important adjustment period for the domestic beef industry.

As some experts urged, during that period of time, the Chinese government should substantially increase its policy support in land, husbandry science and technology, and other assistance to help domestic cattle breeders enlarge their business scale, which is crucial to lowering the overall production costs.

Domestic breeders and beef industry practitioners should take that as an opportunity to further improve their management, upgrade their technology and strengthen international cooperation to lower their production costs so as to further enhance their competitiveness in the world market.

Song Chen



## Opinion Line

## Shared aspiration to open up strategic corridor bears fruit

On Friday, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project was launched in Kyrgyzstan. The top Chinese leader sent a congratulatory letter to the commencement ceremony.

With the Belt and Road Initiative being introduced in 2013, the China-Europe freight train service has increasingly become a convenient and reliable mode of international transportation. Just last month, the cumulative number of China-Europe freight trains exceeded 100,000. With growing demand for China-Europe freight train services, the plan for a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway has come into focus. The project is planned to officially commence construction in July 2025, with a construction period of six years.

With the launch of the project, a new railway corridor between China and Central Asia will be established, further highlighting the pivotal role of the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region in global transportation and trade.

The railway will serve as a new railway corridor for cooperation between China and Central Asian countries. It will shorten the transportation time between China and the Central Asian region, effectively reduce the logistics costs for enterprises along the route, promote economic synergy between southern Xinjiang and the Fergana Valley, and drive regional trade and integration.

The construction of the railway holds significant importance for the three countries involved and

the entire Central Asian region. Central Asia is an important partner in China's economic diplomacy efforts, and the railway will enable China to connect more conveniently with Central Asian countries, offering more opportunities for cooperation in energy, minerals, machinery, and equipment sectors. The completion of the railway will also boost tourism.

With the opening of the railway, tourists from China and other countries will be able to visit Central Asia's historical sites more easily, promoting the development of regional tourism. Additionally, the railway will facilitate closer people-to-people exchanges among the three countries, further promoting regional stability and harmony.

—XINHUA NEWS AGENCY

## Economy making progress despite risks, challenges

China announced the results of its fifth national economic census on Thursday, which was the first one conducted following the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The census revealed that in 2023, China's GDP approached 130 trillion yuan (\$17.8 trillion), ranking second in the world. For the past five years, China's contribution to global economic growth averaged around 30 percent, making it the largest source of global economic growth.

Structurally, there are three clear trends in the nation's development. First, there has been a significant increase in the number of service industry operators, which have become an important force in supporting economic growth and promoting high-quality employment. By the end of 2023, the number of employees in the secondary industry was 164 million, a decrease of 8.26 million from the end of 2018, while those in the tertiary industry reached 265 million, an increase of 54.01 million.

At the same time, manufacturing continues to advance, social division of labor becomes more refined, and tasks such as design and testing within the manufacturing sector begin to be outsourced, becoming part of the productive service industry. Additionally, internet-based service industry models have emerged, significantly increasing the demand for services such as ride-hailing, express deliveries, e-commerce, and livestreaming, which have absorbed a large number of workers from the manufacturing sector.

Second, China's manufacturing industry has maintained rapid and high-quality development. By the end of 2023, the total assets of legal manufacturing entities nationwide reached 151 trillion yuan, growing by 41.7 percent, with the growth rate and proportion of high-end industries represented by equipment manufacturing and high-tech manufacturing increasing.

The third trend is that after implementing the innovation-driven strategy, the development momentum has become stronger. Over the five years, the number of invention patent applications filed by industrial enterprises above designated size increased by 65.1 percent, and the number of high-tech service industry enterprises accounted for more than one-fourth of the total number of service industries above designated size.

The census data show that over the past five years, China's economy has maintained a stable yet progressive development trend, withstanding multiple internal and external risks, such as trade frictions and pandemic shocks, which lays a solid foundation for China's next phase of development.

—21ST CENTURY BUSINESS HERALD

## What They Say

## Potential TikTok reprieve positive development

On Friday, US president-elect Donald Trump asked the US Supreme Court to pause the potential TikTok ban from going into effect, until his administration takes office and can pursue a "political resolution" to the issue.

There are voices claiming that Trump is rendering assistance to TikTok because it helped him harvest support from young voters during his run for the presidency. But US President Joe Biden registered a TikTok account in February, about four months earlier than Trump, while Vice-President Kamala Harris registered her account before she became the presidential nominee. Actually, Trump actively pushed for a TikTok ban in his last term from 2016 to 2020.

TikTok is just a platform, and what really matters is that TikTok has already become part of the daily life and an essential channel of

expression for more than 170 million US users and any attempt to ban it risks violating their constitutional freedom of speech.

Data show that since 2020, TikTok's quarterly download volume in the United States has surpassed that of native social media apps such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. According to Statista, by April, or the time Biden signed a "ban or sell" act targeting it, its number of monthly active users had already exceeded 1.58 billion around the world, making it the fifth most popular social app.

In a statement, TikTok also pointed out that if the "ban or sell" order is not frozen, within a month small businesses on TikTok would lose over \$1 billion in revenue. That loss is the real challenge to US national security as it might push higher the unemployment

rate that's closely associated with crime and social disorder.

Another blow the TikTok ban will deal is to the credibility of the US government. TikTok is fully registered in accordance with US laws, operates legally and compliantly, and is subject to US regulatory oversight. By trying to suppress a legal company with political power, the US government makes itself and its written laws untrustworthy. This is particularly ironic for a country that claims "free speech" and a free-market economy.

Jan 19 will be the deadline for the "sell or ban" order. It's also going to be the last day of the Biden administration. From Jan 20, the Trump administration will face all the problems of the US. By trying to pause the order, it has made a rational move to protect the US' long-term interests.

—ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

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## GLOBAL VIEWS

DARYL GUPPY

## Common experience

China's support for Southeast Asia's development is welcomed, including its initiatives to boost regional economic security

In 2024, the world has witnessed further transformation and instability, marked by protracted and intensified geopolitical conflicts, repeated attempts to decouple and sever supply chains, and the rapid rise of the Global South. As important members of the Global South, the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have assumed a greater role in promoting regional peace and prosperity.

Determined neutrality and non-interference are two of the defining characteristics of ASEAN. Some observers see this as a source of strength with its focus on common objectives rather than differences. Others see it as a source of weakness because it tolerates many diverse forms of governance.

ASEAN faces several challenges if it is to remain an essential part of the regional security architecture. Its preference for resolute neutrality will attract increasing pushback from major foreign players in the region, including invited ASEAN guests, whose intention is to use ASEAN as an adjunct tool of their own agendas for the region.

The challenge is also much broader than the proposed tariff and sanctions regime foreshadowed by US president-elect Donald Trump. The modern network of global trade agreements enmeshes the ASEAN members, giving them greater power to avoid being carved-out by US actions. Strategies that can be adopted by regional nations to counter trade protectionism start with a refusal to join the game and respond in kind. China has started on this path with the announcement of zero tariffs on goods coming from the least-developed countries of the Global South.

However, there is a feeling among regional think tanks, including those from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Republic of Korea and others, that the emerging environment is the most significant threat that ASEAN has ever experienced. The need to remain relevant, effective and if necessary, aggressively neutral in regard to its members, is a critical component of the regional security architecture.

The more fundamental challenge to ASEAN comes from the desire of former colonial countries to re-establish their dominance in the region. For some,

such as the United Kingdom, it's a desire to reassert a level of influence that has been eroded by the passage of time. The main purpose of the planned UK major naval exercise in the "Indo-Pacific" region for 2025 is to revive the ghost of past domination and influence.

For Australia, sometimes described as a sub-imperial power, it includes coercing smaller nations into the surrender of sovereignty over their foreign relations. The trilateral security alliance AUKUS nuclear submarine deal causes discomfort for what it says about Australia's changing attitude to the region. The concerns are only slightly mitigated by the decades-long delay in delivery.

While the remnant colonial attitude is not so overt, it sits behind the resurgence of European involvement in the ASEAN region. It is a hankering for past glory. It is a direct threat to the framework of determined neutrality that aspires to forge a future of inclusivity and resilience — one that will anchor peace and prosperity throughout Southeast Asia.

Colonialism and the bitter struggles to break free are remembered by people in this region. These are not abstract concepts, and although not often stated overtly, they underpin the common ASEAN experience.

The rejection of colonial legacies defines the experience of the ASEAN members. The post-colonial world is the strength of ASEAN that takes the concept of determined neutrality beyond a refusal to interfere in the affairs of others to include a rejection of interference in their own affairs. The days of engineered coups and puppet governments are long past and unwelcome to return. ASEAN leans more favorably toward those major regional powers such as China and Indonesia that understand and support this desire for genuine sovereign independence.

It suggests that ASEAN will need to become more aware and play a more active part of the security architecture of the region by pushing back against attempts to interfere with and manipulate the region. The ASEAN members have no desire to return to colonial relationships.

The United States has always been a belligerent player in global trade, ever willing to rely on its own interpretations of rules. The application of US versions of global rules is a major hurdle to fair and equitable treatment of trade. These are the core issues, which undermine economic security and lie at the heart of

ASEAN discussions and aspirations.

ASEAN provides a choice by supporting the foundational framework of free trade in the region. China continues to lend its support for ASEAN's collaborative ethos to reduce trade barriers.

China's support and assistance are not dependent upon the ASEAN members adopting a single political system or ideology. Unlike the colonial approach which uses trade as a tool of exploitation, China's Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative and other programs already inject stability into Asia and the rest of the world.

At the same time, the ASEAN members are making efforts to enhance regional integration. For instance, Malaysia is taking steps to support and advance the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, an ASEAN-advocated strategic long-term plan that aims to guide the region's growth and prosperity over the next two decades and does not rest on military solutions. Already some Western nations see this as a threat to their objectives which see neutrality as an example of weakness.

In a strategic effort to leverage the experiences of notable regional figures, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is assembling a team of advisers such as reportedly Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo and Thailand's former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra to support his country's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN. Their experience provides the muscle for policy development and implementation.

China's support for ASEAN's development is welcomed and includes participation in wide-ranging programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative which is designed to boost economic security.

China can explore effective ways to synergize the BRI, the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative with the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and work with the ASEAN members to accelerate the signing and implementation of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0 Upgrade Protocol.

*The author is an international financial technical analysis expert and a former national board member of the Australia China Business Council. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.*



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

HAN BING AND CHEN ZHAOYUAN

## Double down

China and ASEAN should join hands to promote regional integration in the face of growing external uncertainties

The world has entered a new period of turbulence and changes, with challenges such as the global economic slowdown, climate change and geopolitical disruptions becoming more severe. With the outcome of the 2024 US presidential election, unilateralism and protectionism may further intensify the uncertainty of international trade policies. Against this backdrop, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations should make it a strategic choice to promote a high level of regional integration to jointly address these challenges.

First, China and ASEAN should continue to uphold their consensus on openness and deepen cooperation between the two sides. Since China and ASEAN started their dialogue process in 1991, the two sides have achieved remarkable results in all-round and mutually beneficial cooperation, and economic and trade relations have advanced in leaps and bounds.

The establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area has significantly boosted the regional integration process. Trade figures highlight this partnership: for 15 consecutive years, China has been ASEAN's top trading partner, and ASEAN has been China's largest for four consecutive years. In the field of investment, by the end of 2023, six ASEAN members were on the list of the top 20 countries in China's outward foreign direct investment stock.

In recent years, the two sides have accelerated the construction of a China-ASEAN community with a shared future, establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership aimed at peace, security, prosperity and sustainable development. In 2025, China will celebrate the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar, the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Thailand, and the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Singapore, which will create new opportunities for further consolidating and developing China-ASEAN relations.

Therefore, despite possible external disturbances in the short term, the major trend of deepening regional integration and development between China and ASEAN should not be shaken. This is not only a necessity for economic cooperation between the two sides, but also a key measure for ASEAN to strengthen

regional security and safeguard its own autonomy and neutrality.

Second, China and ASEAN should comprehensively expand mutually beneficial cooperation in emerging areas and promote cooperation in their industrial and supply chains.

The CAFTA, which entered into force in 2019, has achieved significant outcomes. And the CAFTA 3.0, which substantially concluded upgrade negotiations in October, builds upon the existing agreements by reaching agreements on the digital economy, green economy and supply chain connectivity chapters in their respective economic and trade agreements.

This brings new opportunities for China and ASEAN to continuously deepen the regional industrial division of labor, promote cooperation in their industrial and supply chains, and form a more open and prosperous regionally integrated big market. For example, in terms of combating climate change and developing a green economy, Malaysia and Cambodia aim to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, and Thailand plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2065. China's support in the area of the green economy, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative, has helped ASEAN to improve the resilience of its industrial chain against climate change and disruptions in the global supply chain.

The World Energy Investment report shows that Southeast Asia's spending on clean energy accounts for only about 2 percent of the global total. It also reveals that annual average energy investment of the region over the past three years was \$72 billion, but would need to increase to over \$130 billion to align with the International Energy Agency's Announced Pledges Scenario by the end of the decade. The dynamic deepening of regional environmental cooperation is able to promote innovative cooperation on green technologies between China and ASEAN to address the challenges of climate change.

Finally, China and ASEAN need to enhance their connectivity through institutional measures. And the "hard connectivity" of infrastructure must be accompanied by the "soft connectivity" of rules and regulations, as well as cultural bonds.

In recent years, China and ASEAN have made remarkable progress in connectivity, with the two sides strengthening the alignment of the BRI and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, and jointly upgrading the level of regional connectivity.

For instance, major projects such as the China-Laos Railway and the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway have effectively promoted the hard connectivity of the countries concerned. However, to further

advance regional integration cooperation, it is necessary to deepen cooperation in areas such as trade facilitation, standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment procedures, especially through institutional opening-up measures to promote the further development of trade and investment cooperation.

In addition, with the increasingly close economic and trade exchanges between China and the ASEAN members, the two sides are also deepening exchanges and cooperation in education, tourism, think tanks, media and other areas. According to the State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report, released in April 2024 by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singapore-based think tank, China "continues to be seen as the most influential economic (59.5 percent) and political-strategic (43.9 percent) power in the region".

To advance regional integration and cooperation, it is necessary for China and ASEAN to further promote people-to-people exchanges, build regional consensus and strengthen the social foundation of cooperation between the two sides. These exchanges are not only reflected in economic cooperation, but also rooted in the ASEAN members' common memory of sovereign independence and rejection of external intervention, reflecting respect for regional cultural diversity.

To sum up, in the face of the complex global environment, China and ASEAN should continue to uphold the position of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030, which firmly opposes growing protectionist and anti-globalization sentiments, and reaffirm that international trade and investment are important engines for sustainable economic growth and development.

The two sides should accelerate the completion of follow-up work and make preparations for signing the CAFTA 3.0 in 2025, maintain a rules-based trade environment, provide investors with a predictable business environment through high-level regional integration and cooperation, further tighten the ties of economic and trade cooperation for mutual benefit and win-win results, and jointly safeguard and promote sustained peace and prosperity in the region.

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ZHANG TING / FOR CHINA DAILY

# LIFE

**A** bluish backdrop with white shapes could conjure images of clouds and sky, or even of undulating oceans, but under Wang Zhenxing's skillful ministrations, it can also become a delicate piece of fabric art.

In his deft fingers, the intricate white patterns emerging on the blue fabric, which range from the floral and the geometric to the whimsical, have a way of drawing those that look at them into the world of Chinese tradition and tranquillity.

"If you get closer to the cloth, you'll notice a faint fragrance. This is the scent of indigo mixed with soybean and lime powder paste," says Wang, who's in his 80s.

The concoction has insect-repelling, anti-inflammatory and detoxifying effects, the artisan from Nantong in Jiangsu province adds.

For the past six decades, Wang has been practicing blue calico printing and dyeing, one of the first crafts named as a form of national intangible cultural heritage in 2006.

"The background is neither pure white, nor pure blue, but a blend of both, and resembles an ink-wash painting — that is what truly defines blue calico printing and dyeing," Wang says as he explains the distinctive, subtle beauty of the craft, which has occupied a spot in the media limelight since influential content creator Li Ziqi visited him in 2018 to learn his secrets.

After she posted a video demonstration in 2020, online searches spiked on social media platforms like Douyin and Sina Weibo.

When Li came to see Wang again in March, she was excited to discover that his sons and grandchildren have also turned their hand to the craft, and spoke about how some of the dyed products Wang showed her were more fashionable, and in line with the taste of young people.

The Chinese use of indigo, a dye made from bluegrass, can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 BC), when the philosopher Xunzi spoke about watching green bluegrass dye turning from yellow to green, from green to blue, and finally to cyan.

The cotton fabric was deeply loved for its colorfast, rustic properties, especially in coastal areas where it rains a lot, like it does in Jiangsu.

With the development of the cotton textile industry in Nantong during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the use of indigo with cotton textiles expanded.

Thanks to a warm and humid local climate, bluegrass was cultivated extensively, and dye workshops multiplied.

According to records, there were as many as 19 hand-dyeing workshops registered with the dyeing and weaving bureau during the period, when indigo products were one of the main tributes submitted to the imperial court.

Nantong blue calico is entirely made by hand, from the spinning and weaving to the dyeing. The patterns are also handmade, using engraved paper stencils that resemble the art of paper-cutting. The style is simple and rugged, and the imagery is often abstract and exaggerated, according to cultural experts.

The patterns are typically a combination of a frame with central motifs. Most are symbolic, conveying auspicious meanings, and images of flowers, birds, fish and insects often serve as carriers of meaning.

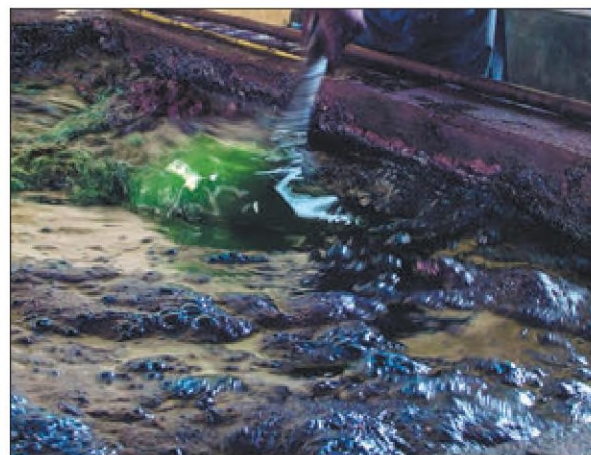
Ever since he became an apprentice at a local dye plant at the age of 18, Wang has followed through on his commitment to the art, continuing to practice techniques dating to the Ming Dynasty.

The bluegrass is first soaked in a stone tank, and after a few days, it



## Revealing their true colors

Family's decadeslong mastery of dyeing technique continues, Yang Feiyue reports.



**Clockwise from top:** Octogenarian artisan Wang Zhenxing from Nantong in Jiangsu province. Wang explains the craft of blue calico printing and dyeing to visitors at his workshop in Nantong. Patterns featuring peony, and peacock feathers on display at the workshop. The process of making dye with bluegrass in a dye tank. Wang engages in the dyeing process at his workshop.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

is placed underneath the plate. "You can't stop and start again; the carving needs to be done in one continuous movement to ensure smooth lines and an ethereal feel, which requires proficiency," Wang says.

Each time the paste is applied, force must be even, the alignment precise and the pattern placement smooth, he adds.

Then dyeing begins. The fabric is removed from the plate and placed in clean water until it is soaked and the paste softens. It is then submerged in a dye tank for about 20 minutes, and left to dry in the air for 30 minutes to allow the indigo to oxidize. As this happens, the fabric is turned frequently to ensure even exposure to the air.

"The dipping and oxidizing process has to be repeated six to eight times, depending on the material and weather conditions," Wang says.

After dyeing, the fabric is dried and treated with an acid solution to fix the color, before being washed and stretched on a frame. The remaining paste is scraped off using a delicate knife.

The fabric undergoes a second acid-fixing and is washed two to three times to create a clear contrast between the blue and white areas.

"Each step of the process is quite intricate, so it's a task that truly tests one's patience and attention to detail," Wang says.

But the reward is worthwhile, as no two pieces are ever identical, giving each piece a unique personality and life.

To help preserve the craft, Wang has roped his entire family into the trade. His youngest son, Wang Jianwei, 50, has mastered the techniques of indigo tank preparation; his second son, Wang Jianyong, 56, has taken charge of dyeing, paste preparation, and pattern application; and his eldest son, Wang Jianfeng, 57, handles the making of the templates. Even his granddaughter, who was born in the 2000s, has taken on pattern and product design.

Wang Jianyong, who has watched his father since he was a child, has decided to take up the family mantle.

He says that the transition from white cotton fabric to meticulously designed patterns in different hues of blue is like magic.

"It's like watching a child grow from babbling to maturity," he says, adding that the resulting sense of pride comes straight from the heart.

While upholding traditional techniques, the family members have also left their own stamp on the craft, and produced three shades of blue — dark, medium and light — and made use of a variety of techniques, including traditional Chinese painting, woodblock printing, and folk paper-cutting.

Wang Zhenxing and his family have also developed new products like backpacks, makeup bags, home decorations and hair accessories, and despite his years, he continues to work at the family dye house, promoting blue calico art.

Since their facility was named a national intangible cultural heritage protection base in 2006, visitors have come from across the country. It has received students from more than 100 institutes of higher learning, and international visitors from Japan, South Korea and Russia have also come to appreciate the art.

Wang Jianfeng still vividly remembers Li Ziqi's visit.

"She is clearly very into the inheritance and development of blue calico printing and dyeing," he says. "Thanks to her, more people have come to know the art, and we hope more will come."

Contact the writer at [yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn)

### What's on



#### Faces of history

Classical portraits preserve the details of history and the evolution of social trends. More than 130 pieces from the collection of the National Museum of China are on show in *Portraiture From the Ming and Qing (1368-1911) Dynasties*, an exhibition until March 30 at Shenzhen Museum in Guangdong province.

The paintings depict emperors and empresses, members of the aristocracy and high-ranking court officials along with banquets attended by intellectuals who would compose poems, paint and chant. They also offer a glimpse into the intimate aspects of women of well-connected families. A major transformation from Ming to Qing works is apparent as Qing artists attempted figurative techniques and the chiaroscuro of Western oil painting introduced by European missionaries.

10 am-6 pm, closed on Mondays. 4001 Jintian Lu, Futian district, Shenzhen, Guangdong province. 0755-8812-5550.

#### Traces in nature

Ancient Chinese perceptions of the relationship between humans

and nature are vividly presented in landscape paintings. Between the ranges of mountains, along the rivers and streams, under trees and surrounded by plants are travelers, or hermits, accompanied by visiting friends who chat, appreciate the scenery, play board games and drink.

The depiction of these small figures in the expanses of a landscape animates the composition and directs the viewers' eyes to appreciate the paintings.

*Where to Find the Traces* is an exhibition at the Anhui Art Museum in Hefei, Anhui province, that dwells on the philosophical views of the classical landscape paintings in the collection of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. The exhibition was curated and first shown at the CAFA Art Museum last year.



The paintings lend viewers the perspective of the figures within the landscapes, from the faraway hill-tops covered with snow to the forests and springs, into a feeling of being part of nature.

9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 1 Chengdu Lu, Hefei, Anhui province. 0551-6280-6800.

#### Great views

The Five Great Mountains of China — Taishan in Shandong province, Huashan in Shaanxi province, Hengshan in Hunan province, Hengshan in Shanxi province and Songshan in Henan province — command thrilling views that have inspired artists and writers to create works hailing the landscapes and embodying the spirit of heroism and perseverance.

*The Great Beauty of Five Great Mountains* is an ongoing exhibition at the National Art Museum of China that displays works of artists of several generations depicting the distinctive views of these peaks, the dense clouds, strange rock formations and extraordinary pine trees on the mountains. It runs until April 8.

9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 1 Wusi Dajie, Dongcheng district, Beijing. 010-6400-6326.

CHINA DAILY



## LIFE

# Minimal set, maximum impact

Chinese stage adaptation of French novel invites actors to innovate, and audiences to explore unspoken depths, **Chen Nan** reports.

A wooden table stands in the center of the stage, with a few sheets of paper scattered across it. A single chair is placed across from the table, and books are stacked in the corners and strewn across the ground. The dim lighting and flickering fireplace reveal a slightly unkempt bed occupying the back of the stage.

When the Beijing People's Art Theatre introduced its upcoming production of the *Enigma Variations*, a Chinese adaptation of the 1996 novel by French author and dramatist Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, the theater presented a glimpse of the stage set, which is minimalist yet rich in symbolism, and reflects the production's themes of isolation and introspection.

The play, which is being staged at the Cao Yu Theater until Jan 12 and features Feng Yuanzheng and Yan Nan in the leading roles, revolves around the dialogue between two men. One, the Nobel Prize-winning author Abel Zornko, lives on an island in the middle of the Norwegian Sea, and is haunted by the memory of a woman he loved passionately, and with whom he corresponded for many years. The second, a self-proclaimed journalist named Erik Larsen, arrives to interview Zornko about his latest book, which is, in fact, a transcript of his correspondence with the woman. As Larsen seeks to uncover the identity of the woman, Zornko becomes infuriated. His evasions and lies twist into increasingly complex puzzles.

"Unlike other plays we have done, which are narratives driven by storytelling, *Enigma Variations* is dialogue-driven," 47-year-old director Xu Ang said in an interview on Dec 21. "This structure, with the two characters interacting in a confined setting, depicts the process of deciphering a puzzle. The audience follows the conversation in an isolated environment, which intensifies the philosophical and psychological tension between the two men. There are many questions waiting to be answered: Is



“Unlike other plays we have done, which are narratives driven by storytelling, *Enigma Variations* is dialogue-driven. This structure, with the two characters interacting in a confined setting, depicts the process of deciphering a puzzle.”

**Xu Ang**, director

Larsen really a journalist? Is it possible that both Zornko and Larsen loved the same woman? Is she still alive?

"There are many dramatic turns in the production, and as a director, I wanted to bring them to life onstage and be understood by the audience. For the two actors, it is quite challenging because of the large amount of dialogue. In their performances, they must touch on universal themes that resonate with the audience," Xu adds. "As for

the audience, they will ask themselves questions, and I hope they enjoy the mystery."

Established in 1952, the Beijing People's Art Theatre is a bastion of Chinese drama that has nurtured a number of acclaimed actors and upheld a legacy of excellence and dedication. The theater is known for Chinese-language plays, especially realistic productions focusing on Beijing's culture, society and language. It also produces adaptations of Western literature and invites international theater companies to perform.

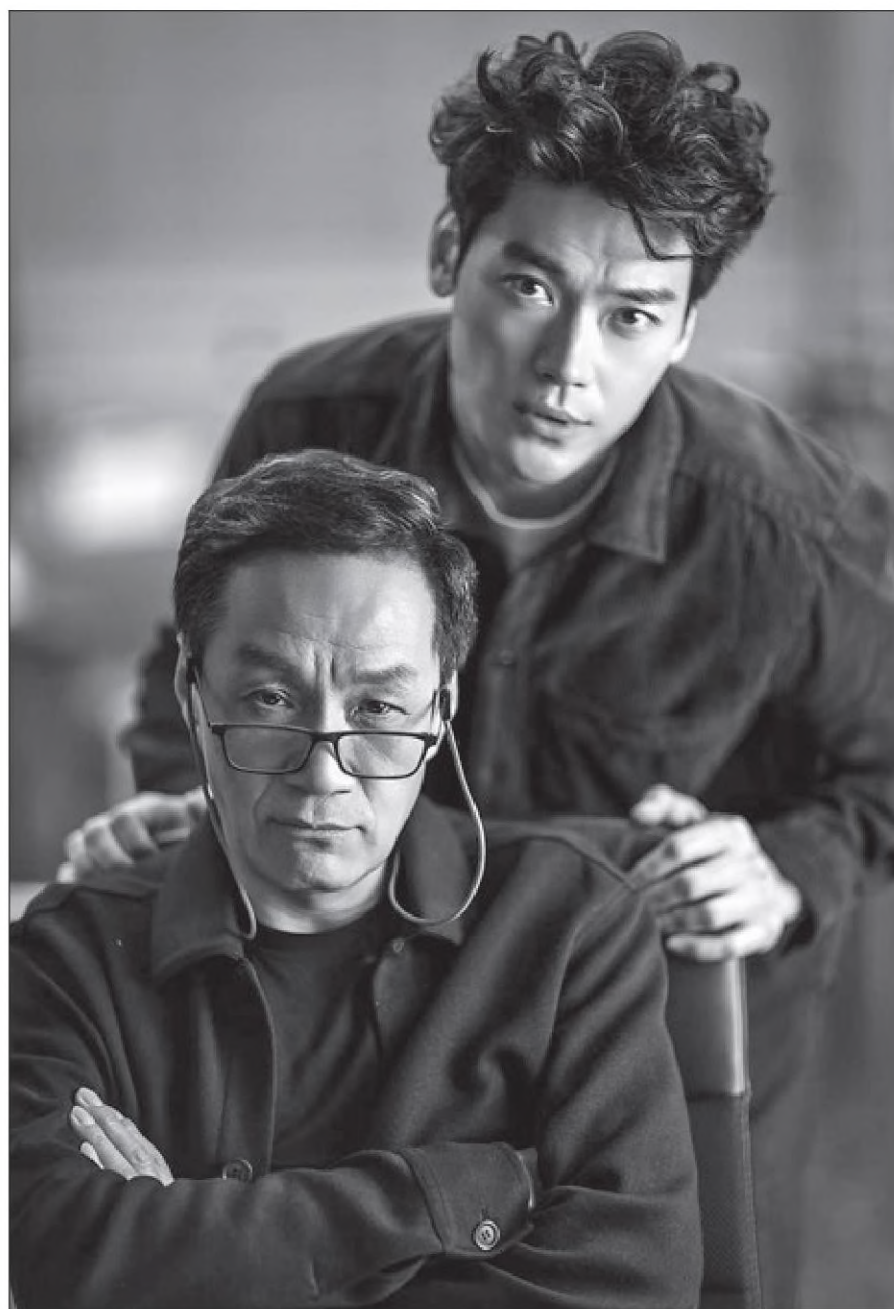
According to Feng, who is also the president of the Beijing People's Art Theatre, the idea of creating a Chinese adaptation of the novel *Enigma Variations* dates back to 2008, when Xu was first chosen to play the role of Larsen. For a number of reasons, the production was delayed.

"Schmitt's writing style is elegant and thoughtful, and weaves philosophical insight with an exploration of human emotion. The structure of the script, with its layered conversations and evolving revelations, creates a sense of unfolding mystery. We are excited that we can finally bring it to life onstage, closing 2024 and beginning 2025," says the 62-year-old Feng, who plays Zornko.

"Over the years, Xu Ang has evolved from a young actor to theater director. He has watched many theatrical adaptations of the novel and developed his own interpretation that explores the depth of the characters' interactions," Feng adds.

He says that as an actor, he wanted to break free from his usual style. The novel's rich inner monologues and introspection are challenging to convey onstage but the adaptation balances these elements by focusing on the verbal exchange between the characters and using symbolism to represent the deeper themes.

"Over time, actors develop certain techniques and habits that become ingrained. But I wanted to break free from those patterns.



Feng Yuanzheng (front) and Yan Nan take on the main roles in the play, *Enigma Variations*, a Chinese stage adaptation of the novel by French author and dramatist Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

This script is different from other plays our theater has staged, such as those about historical figures or Beijing. I tried to step into unfamiliar territory during rehearsals, and allowed myself to react more instinctively in each moment," he continues. "Acting is an evolving craft, and no matter how experienced one is, there is always room for discovery and growth."

He adds that he particularly likes Xu's idea of using minimalist

sets to convey the emotional isolation of the character, and evoke a sense of solitude and intellectual reflection.

Yan, 42, plays the role of Larsen, a realistic character compared to Zornko, who is the romantic hero. Although Yan doesn't work regularly with the Beijing People's Art Theatre, his acting, and especially his "emotional intensity" as Feng puts it, convinced Xu to cast him in the role.

With more than 40 productions

under his belt, Yan is also seeking to break out of his comfort zone.

"For many actors, the opportunity to perform in a production by the Beijing People's Art Theatre is like a dream come true. Working with Xu and Feng, I am gaining a fresh perspective on acting. They stimulate new ideas and encourage me to take risks, opening up space for new techniques," says Yan.

Contact the writer at [chenman@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:chenman@chinadaily.com.cn)

## An enduring enchantment with Peking Opera

The global success of the Chinese video game *Black Myth: Wukong* has helped introduce the tale of Sun Wukong, or the Monkey King, to people around the world. But for Anglo-Iranian Ghaffar Pourazar, the legendary figure has been a part of his life for decades.

Seated before the backstage mirror at Beijing's Liyuan Theatre, an old Peking Opera venue especially popular with foreign travelers, Pourazar deftly applies white, red and black paint to his face, creating the likeness of the mischievous character.

"How time flies! Look at you, you're an old monkey now!" remarks an elderly member of the opera troupe. "Indeed, I am now a white-haired Monkey King," the 63-year-old replies in Mandarin, his Beijing accent showing through.

Pourazar has spent the past three decades mastering Peking Opera, establishing himself as one of the few foreign performers to excel in the traditional art, earning himself fame for his portrayal of the superhero from the classic novel *Journey to the West*.

Currently, Pourazar travels between China and the United States as a cultural ambassador, introducing Peking Opera to American audiences, and his unique perspective of the art to Chinese audiences. "I want to be a bridge between cultures," he says, reflecting on his multicultural background.

### Love at first sight

Pourazar's lifelong passion for Peking Opera began by chance. In 1993, the then 32-year-old computer

animator attended a performance at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall and was instantly captivated.

"I was crying," he says. "I previously had a passion for a number of art forms, including acting, dancing and mime but at that moment, everything else faded away. I saw the convergence of all these arts in Peking Opera."

He went backstage after the show and made friends with the performers. "We didn't speak each other's language, but they could see my passion," he says.

With the help of the head of the troupe, Pourazar enrolled at an opera school in Beijing. Just three months after his first exposure to Peking Opera, he left his life in Britain behind and moved to Beijing to train in martial art roles.

Starting as an adult was not easy, as Peking Opera is a complex blend of vocal performance, mime, martial arts, dance, and acrobatics. "My classmates were all children," he says. "As an adult without any basic skills, it was very hard to practice the movements."

In addition to the physical demands, mastering Chinese was another hurdle. "I was constantly reciting the subtitles and songs, whether I was eating, bathing, walking, or even dreaming," Pourazar adds.

"Though there were some extremely painful days, I enjoyed every moment," he says.

Initially, he focused on portraying soldiers and generals like Wu



Above: Ghaffar Pourazar in Beijing before a Peking Opera performance on Sept 30.

Left: Pourazar puts on a Peking Opera costume before the show.

PHOTOS BY REN KE / XINHUA

Song and Lin Chong, before eventually transitioning to the iconic role of the Monkey King.

### Lifelong commitment

Pourazar believes that great art transcends language. Over the years, he has devoted himself to introducing Peking Opera and Sun Wukong to international audiences, taking Chinese performers to places

like the US, Britain and Malaysia.

He teaches courses and organizes workshops in the US, bringing Peking Opera to curious learners and has also adapted classic plays like *The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven* into English. "I changed the spoken parts and kept the original songs, and it became a success on the international stage," he says.

"I am the most powerful spirit in

“I love the Monkey King for his simplicity and the inner child that defines his character. His love of freedom and quest for longevity are also qualities I respect. I believe he resonates with people of different cultures.”

**Ghaffar Pourazar**, Peking Opera performer

heaven and earth," Pourazar exclaims, dressed in the signature yellow costume of the Monkey King. As he recites the dialogue in English with the distinctive intonation of Peking Opera, he leaps, flips and executes movements that capture the playful nature of the mischievous monkey.

Over the past two decades, his performances have introduced the character to people abroad. "My nephew has become so enamored with the Monkey King that he taught himself to perform the character," Pourazar says.

"I love the Monkey King for his simplicity and the inner child that defines his character. His love of freedom and quest for longevity are also qualities I respect," he says. "I believe he resonates with people of different cultures."

He has also adapted Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into Peking Opera. "By presenting a story that Western audiences are already familiar with, I hope to introduce them to the beauty of Peking Opera," he says.

In recognition of his contributions, Pourazar received the Great Wall Friendship Award from the Beijing government in 2014.

Over the years, he has suffered injuries and health issues. His right knee is arthritic, and he suffers from edema due to excessive exertion during a recent Peking Opera workshop in California, but he continues undeterred.

"I rely on traditional Chinese medicine when I am unwell or injured," he says, sipping green tea from a thermos and adds that his love of Chinese culture extends beyond Peking Opera, to calligraphy, painting, cuisine, and kung fu.

Despite his health challenges and advancing age, Pourazar remains committed to his art.

He is currently working on two Broadway-style musical projects, both influenced by Peking Opera traditions. The first, *Dream of Wukong*, explores his personal journey mastering Peking Opera, while the second, *Dr. Jane Goodall*, is the story of the renowned British ecologist and her extensive work with chimpanzees.

"Cultural exchange should be reciprocal. I aim to blend my expertise in opera with my multicultural background to create enriching artistic experiences for the audience," Pourazar says.

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YEARENDER

## Zheng enjoys an ace season

Olympic champion leads China's tennis revival in a remarkable year

By SUN XIAOCHEN  
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Underlined by historic individual performances and surging public interest in the sport, Chinese tennis has celebrated a remarkable year in 2024 with unprecedented success, on and off the court.

Leading the highlights, and arguably all other sporting feats in 2024, was Zheng Qinwen's history-making Paris 2024 campaign, as she defied long odds to deliver Asia's first tennis singles Olympic gold medal, and the second overall, to inspire a nationwide craze for a racket sport that has long been overshadowed by table tennis and badminton in China.

Zheng's Paris heroics, played out on the red clay of Roland Garros in August, built on tennis legend Li Na's trailblazing first major win in 2011 — also celebrated at the iconic French Open venue — convincing fans, retired players and pundits alike that the sport's future is thriving and in good hands 10 years after Li's retirement.

It also marked a full-circle milestone for tennis promotion in a country where Olympic success traditionally outranks achievements at all other events, which began with now retired pair, Li Ting and Sun Tiantian, winning the women's doubles final at the Athens Games in 2004.

Zheng's compatriots Zhang Zhizhen and Wang Xinyu put the icing on the cake by winning a silver medal in mixed doubles, helping the tennis squad stand out among all of China's medal-laden programs at the Paris Games.

Zheng got her breakout year off to a flying start Down Under, with her first major final appearance at the Australian Open, followed by a strong second half that saw her claim two titles at the WTA250 event in Palermo, Italy, and in the WTA500 in Tokyo.

She carried her Olympic momentum deep into the season, as she reached her first WTA1000 final at home in Wuhan, before fighting her way to the championship match in Riyadh on her WTA Finals debut, finishing the year at a career-high world No. 5.

The 22-year-old also led all women on the Tour in total aces served (446) and most three-set wins (21). She was also announced as the WTA Fan Awards' favorite singles player of the year on Dec 19, proving her growing popularity worldwide.

Given that it was just her third full season competing on the pro circuit, Zheng left fans assured that her fruitful 2024 is just the beginning of something greater.

Other female players who had a year to remember include China's second-highest ranked woman Wang, at No. 37, who reached two semifinals on the tour to go with her Olympic mixed doubles silver, and resilient veteran Zhang Shuai, who snapped a disheartening 24-match losing streak to revive her storied career.

Zhang clinched her first singles win in 603 days, following a Tour record 24-match victory drought, with a straight-sets win over McCartney Kessler of the United States in her opening-round match at the China Open in Beijing, before fighting all the way to the quarterfinals of the WTA1000 event.

"Chinese tennis has achieved huge breakthroughs this year," Zhang, a 35-year-old two-time major doubles winner, said on Thursday in Perth, Australia, while representing China at the United Cup, an 18-country mixed-team tournament.

"A lot of kids have grown interested in tennis and started to practice the sport.

Whereas in the past, they probably would choose table tennis or badminton, now they are picking up tennis rackets. So, I think we all did a good job."

The soaring popularity of tennis in China, inspired by the impressive results at the elite level, has drawn a massive number of new fans to tournaments during the pro season's "China Swing", turning events across the country into hot holiday destinations.

As Asia's only men's and women's combined tournament, the China Open, which took place from Sept 23 to Oct 6, attracted nearly 300,000 visitors, marking a 50 percent increase from 2023, with its total ticket sales setting an all-time record at 80 million yuan (\$11 million).

Sales of the tournament's new mascot, a tennis-ball-shaped doll named "A Zhong", were particularly strong, up 50 percent compared to last year's mascot sales.

Restaurants, cafes and snack bars at the event also saw a significant uptick in business this year, with revenue of on-site catering services exceeding 10 million yuan, marking an annual increase of over 30 percent, according to the tournament organizing committee.

Following the Beijing tournament, this year's Rolex Shanghai Masters, a top-flight ATP1000 event, also set a new attendance record of more than 228,000 during its two-week run, despite mid-tournament rain delays. It also achieved all-time high revenues from sponsorship, ticketing and merchandising.

"The turnout this year far exceeded our expectations, thanks to the booming tennis market in China," said Yang Yibin, chairman of Shanghai Juss Sports Development Group, organizer and promoter of the prestigious Shanghai tournament.

"Bigger crowds and wider broadcast coverage helped enhance the tournament's appeal, bringing in more sponsorship revenues that will contribute to greater investment in more development projects associated with the tournament.

"We've built such a healthy and consistent business model that empowers us to constantly improve the quality and service of the tournament for sustainable success," said Yang.



Leading the charge in China's tennis revival on the women's side were Zheng Qinwen (below), veteran Zhang Shuai (above) and rising star Wang Xinyu (below left).  
WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY AND XINHUA



## Chinese men make a racket in 2024

By SUN XIAOCHEN

The 2024 season has seen Chinese tennis emerge as a true force to be reckoned with on the international stage.

And, it's safe to say, for the first time ever, its men have contributed just as much to that world-elite status as their female compatriots.

Led by world No. 45 Zhang Zhizhen, three Chinese men, including No. 50 Shang Juncheng and No. 65 Buyunchaokete, have ended the 2024 season ranked within the top-100, realizing Chinese fans' long-cherished dream of cheering for their own at the top of the men's game, as they have for their women's stars for decades.

In a series of "firsts" for Chinese men's tennis, between them, the trio have reached five semifinals and two finals on the highly competitive ATP Tour, with the youngest Shang, a 19-year-old sensation, winning his first and Chinese men's second tour-level singles title at the ATP250 event in Chengdu in September.

As the first Chinese to lift an ATP singles title in Dallas, Texas, in February 2023, injury-plagued talent Wu Yibing, a former world No. 54 and 2017 US Open boys' champion, also capped off the 2024 season on a positive note after fighting into the third round at the ATP1000 Masters in Shanghai in October, showing some promise for a healthy return.

With three direct entries via rankings, and two wildcards, five Chinese mainland players entered the singles main draw at this year's Shanghai Masters, making it the biggest ever Chinese representation at any professional tournament on the ATP Tour.

And Zhang hopes this strength in numbers will

only continue to grow, given the sport's surging popularity in the country, driven by a hugely successful year.

"If people are watching us do something and then trying to follow us, that's great news for us," Zhang told atp.com on the eve of Team China's United Cup opener against Team Brazil in Perth, Australia, last week.

"Most Chinese people are watching table tennis or badminton at the Olympics, not tennis, but suddenly they're watching (our) final live on TV," said Zhang, who won a mixed doubles silver medal at Paris 2024 with partner Wang Xinyu in August.

"Right away, more people know who we are, and more people are trying to play, trying to learn. That's really good."

Despite a month-long season break, Zhang's momentum shows no sign of slowing down, as he breezed past Brazil's Thiago Monteiro 6-3, 6-0 in just 54 minutes in a men's singles match on Friday to help China beat Brazil in a group tie at the United Cup, an 18-country mixed-team tournament.

Zhang's female counterpart Gao Xinyu got Team China off to a scintillating start by stunning Brazil's world No. 17 Beatriz Haddad Maia in a three-hour and 22-minute, three-set win in the women's singles opener, which ended up being the longest women's match in tournament history.

Already a strong baseline hitter and tough defender, Zhang made the work look easy on Friday by winning 87 percent of his first-serve points against Monteiro, thanks to a solid offseason training program particularly focused on improving his serving motion.

The 28-year-old Shanghai native, the oldest among China's top-three, hailed the healthy competition with his younger compatriots as a strong motivation.

"I always see this pressure in a good way; they're pushing me," said Zhang, who started the 2024 season as China's only top-100 man.

"For sure, they are going to overtake me one day, but they're also pushing me forward. They give me a more positive way to look at these things.

"More energy is coming through. As an athlete, you want to keep the highest status for as long as you can, (whether it) be Chinese No. 1, or even world No. 1.

"This year, 2024, has been really good, really successful. I'm quite happy with what I'm doing, and also with my team."



Zhang Zhizhen (above), Shang Juncheng (far left) and Wu Yibing had an outstanding year in 2024, raising the men's game in China to new levels of success.  
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