

Color of good luck

Red displays mirror growing influence of Spring Festival
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Former defense minister testifies at Yoon's trial
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Winter charm
Visitors to Guizhou's slopes, springs spend days skiing, nights soaking
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Caring for the people



Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, visits a grocery market in Shenyang, Liaoning province, during an inspection of the city on Thursday. Xi, who is also Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, learned about local market supplies before Spring Festival, the most important festival for the Chinese people, as well as measures to improve services for the public and ensure people's livelihoods. LI XUENEN / XINHUA

Major plan aims to ensure stable A-share market

By ZHOU LANXU
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China has launched a multiyear plan to ensure a continuous inflow of additional long-term funds into the A-share market, with the aim of providing direct support for the steady performance of the world's second-largest stock market, officials said on Thursday.

Analysts said the measures, potentially pumping in around 1 trillion yuan (\$137.2 billion) of medium- to long-term funding annually, indicate that policymakers are stepping up pragmatic efforts to restore investor confidence, which is an immediate priority amid lukewarm domestic spending and lingering external uncertainties.

"Starting in 2025, large State-owned insurance companies will strive to invest 30 percent of their annual new premiums in the A-share market, which means at least hundreds of billions of yuan in new long-term funds for A shares annually," Wu Jing, chairman of the China Securities Regulatory Commission, said on Thursday.

Wu said at a news conference that mutual funds will also increase their holdings of free-float A shares by at least 10 percent each year over the coming three years, as specified by the imple-

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mentation plan for promoting medium- and long-term capital entering the market.

The plan, unveiled on Wednesday by six central agencies including the CSRC, marks the latest step for policymakers to fulfill the top leadership's call for stabilizing the stock market.

Wu added that the second phase of a pilot program that facilitates the launching by insurers of long-term stock investment funds will be implemented in the first half of 2025, at a size of no less than 100 billion yuan.

The announcements caused the A-share market to jump, though it retreated later, with the benchmark Shanghai Composite Index up 0.51 percent to close on Thursday at 3,230.16 points.

Yang Haiping, a research fellow at the Beijing Wealth Management Industry Association, said that compared with some of the previous market stabilization measures, the new plan directly targets the funding side, making it more precise and likely to have an impact.

"It will bring in more real money, optimize the structure of investors, stabilize market expectations and play a key role in the long-term stable operation of the stock market,"

Yang said, adding that the A-share market might see an annual total of over 1 trillion yuan in additional long-term money inflow if the plan is well implemented.

The plan also extends the performance evaluation cycles for medium- and long-term funds. The performance of mutual funds, State-owned commercial insurance companies, the basic pension fund and annuity funds will be evaluated over a cycle of more than three years. The evaluation period for the national social security fund will be more than five years.

Wu, the CSRC chairman, said that "for the task of ushering in medium- to long-term capital, this is a very significant institutional breakthrough", as implementing long-term performance evaluation can smooth out the impact of short-lived market fluctuations on investment performance.

Wu added that the commission is also attracting long-term investments by encouraging listed companies' dividend payouts and share buybacks, with the dividend yield of the CSI 300 Index having reached 3 percent, which is significantly higher than the yield on 10-year Chinese treasury bonds.

In December and January, the total dividend distributions of A-share listed companies are expected to exceed 340 billion yuan,

or 7.6 times the amount seen in the same period last year, official data showed.

Yang Delong, chief economist at First Seafund, said that given the advantage of stock dividend yields, once the medium- to long-term funds enter the stock market as planned, other types of money such as residential deposits will follow and strengthen overall stock market performance.

"A rise in stock asset prices would boost consumption, driving a virtuous cycle for economic recovery," Yang said.

Xiao Yuanqi, vice-minister of the National Financial Regulatory Administration, said at the news conference that the administration will approve 50 billion yuan before the Spring Festival holiday, which starts on Tuesday, for the second-phase pilot program for insurers' stock investment funds, and will expand the program later.

"A swift implementation of the plan is poised to bring funds into the market quickly, preventing further market adjustments," said Feng Jianlin, chief economist at Beijing POST Economic Consulting.

"Boosting investor confidence requires both immediate and systemic solutions," Feng added. "Fundamentally, it is necessary to improve expectations for China's medium- to long-term economic trajectory."

MODERNIZATION FOR ALL

Sino-Grenadian ties bear fruit of shared growth

Numerous projects improve the lives of local people, reflect 20-year friendship of nations

Editor's Note: China Daily presents this series to tell the stories of how China is acting on the vision of President Xi Jinping, pursuing modernization not for the nation alone, but for all developing countries. The series starts with Grenada as the Caribbean nation's prime minister made a weeklong visit to China.

By MO JINGXI
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In Grenada, an island country in the eastern Caribbean Sea, the National Cricket Stadium is undergoing major repairs and an upgrade with aid from the Chinese government, bringing closer to reality the vision of the stadium becoming a premier sporting and entertainment venue in the English-speaking Caribbean region.

"The stadium is a good place and like a home," said 19-year-old Danny Joseph, a player on the Grenada national cricket team, who has been professionally trained at the stadium since childhood.

Joseph, who dreams of playing for the West Indies cricket team, said he believes there will be more professional facilities, following the stadium's renovation, that can provide higher-quality training opportunities, which would take him closer to his dream.

West Indies, nicknamed the Windies, is a men's cricket team representing a group of mainly English-speaking countries and territories in the Caribbean region.

Cricket is not only an integral part of the daily life of Grenadians but also a source of national pride. The stadium, renovated with aid from China in 2006, is one of numerous projects that have significantly improved the lives of local people while reflecting the friendship between China and Grenada in the 20 years since the two countries resumed diplomatic relations.

"The seed which was planted back in 2005 has blossomed into a tree that is bearing fruits for both the people of Grenada and China through agriculture, infrastructure, cultural exchanges and healthcare," Grenadian Prime Minister Dickon Mitchell said during his weeklong visit to China, which concluded on Jan 17.

As the first foreign leader received by China in the new year, Mitchell brought with him a high-level delegation to learn about China's development in various sectors.

The first stop upon his arrival in Beijing was automaker BAIC Group, where he took a test drive of a Chinese new energy car. He even asked the Grenadian ambassador to immediately place an order.

On Jan 13, the two governments signed a total of 13 cooperation agreements covering a wide range of areas including agriculture, energy and the environment, renewable energy, arts, culture and tourism, and the blue, or ocean, economy.

"Through these agreements, we continue to build a stronger bridge of collaboration that will bring tangible benefits to our people, creating new opportunities for growth and development," Mitchell said.

"Although the road to development is full of challenges, we remain optimistic about the future. With the inspiration from China's progress, we can work together to address the challenges ahead," he told a bilateral trade and investment forum on Jan 14.

Chinese Ambassador to Grenada Wei Hongtian said in an article published on Jan 10 that China and Grenada have forged a strong relationship that has brought substantial benefits to the two nations and their peoples.

"This relationship sets a brilliant example for mutual respect, equality and win-win cooperation between countries of different sizes," Wei said.

Before his visit to China, Grenada's prime minister had told reporters that "many times, as small islands, we don't always get the respect from large islands because they see us as small or insignificant".

However, in the Grenada-China relations, "we are treated with the same courtesies, the same level of respect, and we are listened to in the same manner as any larger country", Mitchell said.

China's achievements in areas like eradicating poverty, which were built on decades of experience, serve as valuable lessons for Latin American and Caribbean countries, he added.

Yue Yunxia, deputy head of the Institute of Latin American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that China's cooperation with Caribbean countries has witnessed fast progress in recent years, and such cooperation has no political strings attached and does not target any third party.

See **Ties**, page 3

AI journey of China is a chapter in human progress

In recent years, artificial intelligence has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping industries and redefining the global technological landscape. Widely regarded as a cornerstone of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, AI is driving breakthroughs in fields such as healthcare, finance, manufacturing and transportation.

At the forefront of this revolution are some United States-based tech giants such as Nvidia, Google and Intel, whose sustained investments in research and development have so far solidified their leadership in the field. The optimism surrounding AI's potential has not only fueled technological advancements but also driven a significant increase in the stock prices of relevant companies, galvanizing investors worldwide.

Having said that, the global AI

WORLD WATCH
By Eric Lee

race is not a one-sided game. While the US has long been a dominant player, China has rapidly emerged as a formidable competitor, demonstrating remarkable resilience and innovation in the face of significant challenges. Chief among these challenges is the US' technology sanctions, which have limited China's access to advanced semiconductor chips. Everyone knows these high-performance chips are critical for training AI models. Many believed that such restrictions could severely hinder China's ambitions in this regard. Yet, China's talent has defied expectations, leveraging independent research, creative engineering and strategic investment to sustain its momentum in AI development.

Faced with a scarcity in advanced computing power because of restrictions on high-performance chips, Chinese engineers have adopted innovative approaches to optimize AI workflows.

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HOBBYISTS ON MISSION TO DISCOVER NEW AND LOST FLORA

Hikes in the mountains surrounding Beijing yield rich haul of plant species

By XIN WEN
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It was on one of his regular hikes in the mountains on the outskirts of Beijing that botanist Mu Xianyun came across a tiny flower growing in the moss. He had just sat down for a well-earned rest, when the flower caught his eye. A study of the flower revealed it belonged to the Rubiaceae family, and was a species rarely found in North China.

Mu, who is in his 40s, has turned his hikes in the mountains around the capital in his spare time into a research project of sorts. The walks have allowed him to discover new species of orchids and several flowers and trees that were not known to exist in the region, opening up a world of rich diversity and provid-

in-depth

ing visitors who beat a path to the remote mountainous areas more reasons to visit.

Like Mu, the others are drawn to Beijing's improving natural environment, with its forest cover of nearly 45 percent, and are eager to enjoy different types of flowers and wild grass that grow in the deep autumn season.

For Mu, the initial aim was just to enjoy nature. "I am a quiet person. It's nice to be in nature, seeing the light passing through the forest and falling on the moss under the trees. It makes me feel good," he said.

See **Flowers**, page 2

Burning issue



Vehicles pass a hillside engulfed in flames caused by the Hughes Fire near Castaic Lake in southern California, the United States, on Wednesday. More than 31,000 people have been ordered to evacuate. DAVID SWANSON / REUTERS See **story**, page 15

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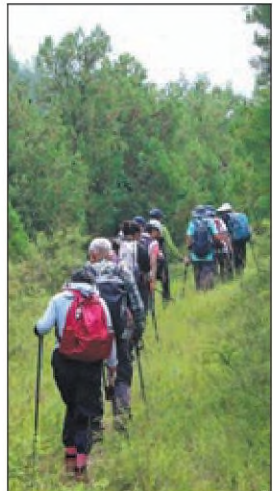
PAGE TWO



Loranthus tanakae.
JIANG JIRU / FOR CHINA DAILY



Cypripedium guttatum.
PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Hobbyists look for flowers during a viewing tour in Beijing.
PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From left: *Cypripedium macranthos*, *Cypripedium shanxiense*, *Lilium concolor* and *Primula saxatilis* can be found in Beijing.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Thalictrum aquilegifolium.
SONG MEIHUI / FOR CHINA DAILY



Viscum coloratum.
JIANG JIRU / FOR CHINA DAILY



A butterfly frolics on a flower in Luoyang, Henan province.
NIU SHUPEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Flowers: Unveiling Beijing's hidden botanical treasures

From page 1

As he started discovering more and more rare and unique flora and fauna, Mu became motivated to embark on more excursions and fieldwork.

Compared with conventional plant classification at nurseries, finding new species of flowers and wild grass in the mountains takes more effort and involves some luck.

"When observing a likely new species of wildflowers in the mountains, you need to be careful and keep it intact," Mu said.

Mu has studied wildlife conservation, specifically plant taxonomy, in graduate school. He graduated with a bachelor's degree, majoring in biological science.

The history of plant classification can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and is regarded as the foundation of botany.

"First we know what the plant and its name is, then we get to know the genetic relations between different species, the kin recognition and where they originated, how they spread, and how they have evolved," said Mu.

His field of study has helped him to cultivate a sharp eye for plants he sees in daily life. When climbing in the mountains, he photographs plants that look unique.

"If some plants look different to me, I take extra photos. I'd take casual pictures of plants that seemed to be variations within a species, maybe a bit large or small, and I would take it home for further research," he said. "It is often upon careful examination that I discover I have captured a completely different species."

Hike and hobby

Many plant hobbyists have adopted Mu's approach of seeking out various unique flowers while hiking in the mountains. They organize nature experience activities that focus on observing flowers in the mountains, allowing the local community to continue benefiting from a healthy ecological environment.

Xue Kai, 48, is one such hobbyist

who has devoted much of his spare time to taking photos of flowers and wild grasses in the mountains for more than two decades.

In 2006, he established a website dedicated to recording plant species he found in Beijing, to let more individuals who are interested in exploring plants get to know the species and their growing conditions.

Till 2008, Xue said he had got to know more than 800 wild plants in Beijing and launched several events through an online forum for participation in outdoor activities to learn about plants.

"There was a sudden surge in finding new plant species by me in 2008," said Xue. "Since then due to a busy work schedule, I've had less time to go hiking and observe plants for over 10 years, and my plant identification skills didn't improve much."

"It was not until 2019 that I picked up my old habit of finding flowers in the mountains," he said.

With the aim of searching for tiny wild orchids in the capital city, in July 2019, he spent three days looking for traces of the flowers in the Yudu Mountains in Beijing's Yanqing district. He stumbled upon *Monotropa hypopitys*, translated as pine-shadow orchid in English, which despite its name, is not a true orchid but a member of the rhododendron family.

"It made a deep impression on me because I had never seen anything like it before," said Xue. "I discovered it completely by accident while searching for orchids in Yudu Mountains, crawling on the ground and examining every inch."

The pine-shadow orchid is a saprophytic plant, meaning it lives in symbiosis with fungi. After germinating underground, the plant relies on underground fungi to provide nutrients, and then it grows and flowers.

"Pine-shadow orchids typically grow under pine trees in damp soil, especially during the summer months. But not every suitable environment has these orchids," said Xue.

"Finding it also relies on luck," he said, adding that the chance of discovering this plant is greater in the city because of the overall good ecological conditions.

After discovering a new species, Xue said he checks on them often, observing the entire process of flowering, fruit bearing and germination.

"It's great to see it from blooming to fruiting and sprouting," he said. "It goes through these stages, and each visit reveals a new phase."

However, he could not locate the pine-shadow orchid later.

"It perhaps could be the environment change. Maybe it moved to another place, or maybe this place wasn't suitable so its seeds probably drifted to another place and sprouted there," he said.

Chasing blooms

In 2021, Xue began organizing flower viewing tours, taking people who are interested in plants and flowers to the mountains around Beijing, and explaining to them about parts of the flowers they don't usually notice.

"People observe a flower, likely captivated by its striking hue. However, we can go beyond that by dissecting the flower, to explore its peculiar and unique structure. Such expeditions offer the possibility of getting to know new species," he said.

"We, as hobbyists, can travel to new places, discovering different flowers by accident, which also provides a new window for experts to engage in further research of the variety," Xue said, adding that in recent years, most of the new plant species discovered in Beijing have been initially found by enthusiasts and then collected and verified by experts.

Beijing lies in an area marked by steep slopes in the northwest and low flat terrain in the southeast. Around 61 percent of Beijing is mountainous. In the far mountainous outskirts, seasons usually

arrive about a month earlier than in the city area.

Yet, time seems to slow down in the wild nature, as many unnoticed plants take their time to grow, absorbing energy from the natural environment.

"People like flowers," said Mu. "In fact, flowers are supposed to grow naturally. It's just that due to human activities and other factors, it has become rare for us to see these blooming in the wild."

He remembers the first time he encountered the woodland grass called *Gentianopsis contorta*, a flower that blooms in the autumn of North China.

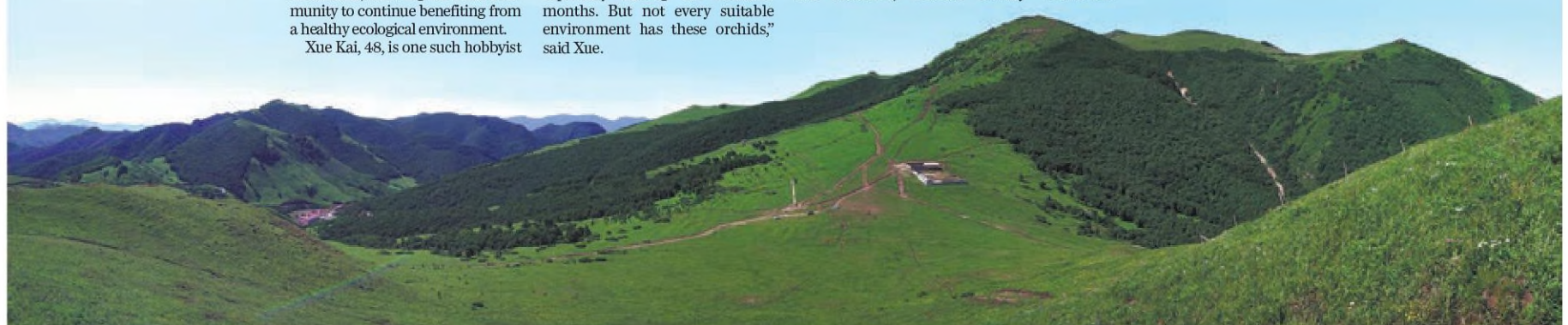
The small flower thrives only in densely shaded woodland environments, and leisurely blooms toward the end of August.

Due to its late blooming and secluded habitat in the mountains, few people encounter it. The *Gentianopsis contorta* in Beijing was not found until 2012 and was officially recorded in 2014.

The appearance of flowers in the mountains is an indicator of the health of the forest it grows in and its ecological environment.

Speaking about the myco-heterotrophic orchid endemic to North China called *Holopogon pekinensis*, Mu said that many organisms are connected to it. The small flowers grow in mixed deciduous forests, under various broad-leaved canopies in rich and moist environments. Fungi in the soil provide energy to it, which requires the diversity of fungi in the soil to be high for good vegetation. Plants and microorganisms continue to support each other for the cycle of life in the forest.

Mu also said that in a place with such rich biodiversity, local surveys including monitoring information about the flowers are crucial. Only by collecting the evidence can decisions be made during the balancing act between development and conservation.



Dongling Mountain, the highest peak in Beijing, is the capital's aerial garden. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Zhai Weiwei, 40, a plant science writer based in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province, was talking with Xin Wen.

Fascinated by plants from a young age, I switched careers to become a dedicated plant science communicator from an electronic countermeasure engineer. Though I didn't follow a traditional academic path in botany, my passion for plants has been a constant.

After quitting my engineering job in 2019, I went to the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden in Yunnan province and listened to lectures on botanical research for half a year.

I love plants and birds. Whenever I see rare plants, I take photos. While I adore the aesthetic beauty of plants and birds, I find myself drawn more deeply to their intrinsic nature.

I remember one early December

"The more species there are, the healthier the environment will be"

trip to Beijing when I saw a string of bright and eye-catching small yellow fruits of a parasitic plant on the outskirts of the capital city. They were visible from afar, standing in sharp contrast to the dreary wintry scene of the northern forests.

The plant, called *Loranthus tanakae*, is a species under the *Loranthaceae* family of the *Loranthus* genus. It grows a cluster of green leaves in the summer, mostly hidden within the lush canopy of trees, hardly noticeable. Only when the wind blows does it rustle gently.

It is not until the winter, when the leaves of big trees have fallen, that the plants emerge from the nooks and crannies.

The leaves of *Loranthus tanakae* disappear in winter, leaving only

the bright yellow small fruits occupying the surrounding trees such as oaks, hazels, elms and pears, plundering their water and nutrients to survive.

Next to the *Loranthus tanakae* was another member of its species, the *Viscum coloratum*. While the fruits of the *Loranthus tanakae* are yellow, the *Viscum coloratum*'s fruits come in two colors, red and yellow.

Although both plants live off the stems of certain trees, they each have their own stems and leaves, allowing them to perform photosynthesis to some extent and not rely entirely on their host. They prefer to grow in the upper parts of

large trees. The *Viscum coloratum* remains evergreen throughout the year.

I read research published by the journal *Flora* in July 2021, indicating that the color of the two types of plants' fruits is not directly related to the type of host. Instead, it is somewhat related to the geographical locations where the plants are grown.

According to the study, in Northeast China, the proportion of red fruits in the extreme north is apparently high, exceeding 70 percent, whereas in some southern areas of the country's northeastern regions, the proportion of yellow fruits takes the majority.



FIRST PERSON

There is no good or bad for the parasitic plants. Only if they impact our lives negatively, then it will be a problem.

For nature, the more species there are in a place, the more stable the climate and structure will be. It resembles a food chain, with three or four species. If one species collapses, the whole chain could fall apart. But in an ecosystem, like a network, the more species there are, the healthier the overall environment will be.

Overwintering birds, or small rodents, can find the colorful fruits of parasitic plants as one of the few food sources available in the cold winter. Birds can also help the dispersal of the parasitic plants' seeds to propagate.

In the future, I hope more people, not just children, will be interested in appreciating the beauty of plants and eager to learn more about them.

TOP NEWS

Business leaders hail appeal of Shanghai

By XING YI in Davos, Switzerland
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Business leaders of major multinational corporations lauded Shanghai's business environment and opening-up measures, casting a vote of confidence in China's economic growth during the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2025 this week in Davos, Switzerland.

They made the comments while attending a reception on Tuesday hosted by Shanghai Mayor Gong Zheng, who has led a delegation to Davos and discussed a wide range of topics with many business leaders, including the further development of Shanghai's business environment.

In his speech at the "Shanghai Night" event, Gong said the city's attractiveness as a global investment hub, an innovation highland and a prime destination for entrepreneurship continues to grow.

Gong said that Shanghai will accelerate the construction of its "five centers" — an international economic center, a financial center, a trade center, a shipping center, and a science and technology innovation center — in order to promote stable economic growth, foster new quality productive forces, deepen high-level reforms and opening-up, and create a world-class business environment.

Shanghai will continue to provide greater opportunities for global enterprises to invest and operate in the city, he added.

Severin Schwan, chairman of the board of directors of the Swiss healthcare company Roche Group, said: "I think Shanghai is really positioned to be one of the major innovation hubs in the life-science industry. I have no doubt. Because it has always been the door to the West. It has a tradition of being a host for the business world, for innovation, for technologies."

"So I'm very optimistic about the future of Shanghai," Schwan said.

Currently, Schwan also serves as the chair of the International Business Leaders' Advisory Council for the Mayor of Shanghai, which convenes leading multinational leaders every fall to give advice to the city. The initiative was set up in 1989 by then Shanghai mayor Zhu Rongji.

Stefan Paul, CEO of global logistics giant Kuehne+Nagel Interna-

tional AG, who has been a member of the advisory council since 2023, said that he appreciates the strong links the city has with the business community.

"In all honesty, I've never experienced it in any other city in the world how much engaged the mayor and his entire team are, to attract foreign investments and develop Shanghai into a multimodal hub," Paul said, adding, "It's really second to none from my perspective."

Paul said that Shanghai is essential for the company's sea freight service, which opened its Shanghai office in 1986 and was among the first foreign logistics companies to come to do business in China after the nation adopted the reform and opening-up policy.

Last year, Shanghai Port became the world's first to have handled 50 million 20-foot equivalent unit containers in annual throughput.

Saying that the milestone was "very impressive," Paul added, "We support open trade and we support as well our customers moving their cargo from Asia, from China, to the rest of the world and vice versa."

Fabrice Megarbane, chief global growth officer of French cosmetics company L'Oréal Group, who spent many years working in Shanghai, praised the innovation and openness of the city, which has launched many measures to implement China's opening-up policies that "allow companies to accelerate investment and better build their business ecosystem".

Megarbane highlighted the importance of innovation in the beauty industry, adding that the high-quality development of China has had a positive impact on the industry.

"We've been launching a 'Big Bang' program to actually work with startups to work out innovative solutions," he said. "Innovation is the name of the game, and Shanghai is the flagship of this innovation in China. So we are very much determined to continue our investment and to grow in the market."

"China has also become a very big market, so the contribution of growth of this market to the overall beauty market worldwide would be significant. This is why the growth story of China is still ahead," he said.



Smile for the New Year

Chinese Ambassador to the United States Xie Feng (center, with red scarf) and his wife, Wang Dan, take a group photo with performers celebrating the Chinese New Year at the Chinese embassy in Washington on Thursday. The Spring Festival falls on Jan 29 this year, according to the Chinese calendar. ZHAO HUANKIN/CHINA DAILY

Xinjiang backs its firms, counters US sanctions

Enterprises to get policy support, urged to step up innovation efforts

By CUI JIA and MAO WEIHUA in Urumqi

Supporting enterprises in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region that have been sanctioned by the United States in the name of combating so-called "forced labor" is the strong will of the people, and Xinjiang will step up its efforts to defy US hegemony with legal means, regional legislators said.

Last year, the region made a breakthrough in using legal means to counter the US passage of a series of laws targeting Xinjiang on groundless accusations and its imposing of sanctions on Xinjiang enterprises, said Zumret Obul, director of the standing committee of the regional people's congress.

On Aug 23, the standing committee passed a resolution to counter US sanctions and support the development of sanctioned enterprises.

"The resolution has been widely

recognized, as it has helped to protect the legitimate rights of the enterprises and people's right to pursue a better life," Zumret said, while delivering the standing committee's work report on Monday at the annual session of the 14th Xinjiang Regional People's Congress, the region's legislature. The session concluded on Wednesday.

The resolution urged governments at different levels to support the development of sanctioned enterprises by offering policy support. In addition, legal aid will be provided to the enterprises, so that they can protect their rights in accordance with the law.

It encourages sanctioned enterprises to step up innovation efforts, further improve their core competitiveness, and says that more support will be given to help the enterprises expand to new domestic and international markets.

This year, the regional legislature

will further advance domestic and foreign-related legal frameworks, in order to provide more legal means to counter actions by the US and some other Western countries to curb Xinjiang's development in the name of groundless accusations, she said.

The US and some other Western countries have been smearing Xinjiang with baseless claims of "forced labor", and the US has even tried to crack down via sanctions on businesses that get source materials such as cotton, tomatoes and photovoltaic products from the region. The so-called "Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act", which took effect in the US in June 2022, prohibited the entry of Xinjiang goods into the US market, in the name of combating so-called "forced labor".

Li Xuan, deputy director of the Department of Commerce of Xinjiang, said the goal of the US is to remove materials sourced from Xinjiang from international supply

chains by imposing sanctions.

"Of course, the businesses will be affected by the sanctions imposed by the US, but we are confident that we can help them get through the difficult times with legal and policy support," Li said.

According to the Xinjiang regional government, by the end of 2023, sanctions had disrupted operations at more than 100 local enterprises. Sanctioned textile and garment factories were forced to cut production or shut down entirely, resulting in significant layoffs.

Aliyar Anwar, a deputy to the regional people's congress and Party secretary of Tuliang village in the regional capital of Urumqi, said the local people are very angry about the smearing of Xinjiang. "Expanding legal means to fight back fully reflects the will of the people and legislators of Xinjiang," Aliyar said.

Mehriban Kadir, another deputy to the regional people's congress and deputy director of Hotan prefecture's lawyers association, said that establishing a legal framework is key in helping Xinjiang counter exterior pressure such as US sanctions.

"Under the legal framework, we can then firmly defend the rights of the sanctioned enterprises and the rights of the people in accordance with the law," Mehriban said.

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Ties: Nation's reform benefits Global South

From page 1

In addition to the cricket stadium, 1,000 units of low-income housing — a gift from the government and people of China — have provided comfortable homes for families in Grenada. Furthermore, in the agricultural sector, China has carried out eight consecutive phases of technical cooperation, introducing and promoting advanced agricultural technologies and equipment to Grenada.

The project to upgrade Maurice Bishop International Airport, financed through a soft loan from the Chinese government, has significantly enhanced Grenada's connectivity with the world, opening new opportunities for the further promotion of trade, tourism and cultural exchanges.

According to Yue, the launch of China-aided projects as well as

"small and beautiful" livelihood cooperation projects, such as refurbishing community centers, building pedestrian bridges and extending roads in the Caribbean region, have won recognition from countries in the region for their contribution to local economies.

Observers noted that as China continues to deepen reform comprehensively, expand opening-up and pursue high-quality development, it has not only promoted its own development but also provided a broader market and unprecedented cooperation opportunities for the rest of the world, especially Global South countries.

Such endeavors will help inject strong impetus into the modernization process of the Global South and make sure that no country is left behind in the process of global modernization, they said.

Speaking at the third Belt and

Road Forum for International Cooperation in October 2023, President Xi Jinping told foreign leaders that "the modernization we are pursuing is not for China alone, but for all developing countries through our joint efforts".

One month later, Xi reiterated China's commitment when delivering a speech in San Francisco in the United States, saying, "We are ready to work with all countries to advance global modernization, featuring peaceful development, mutually beneficial cooperation and common prosperity, and to build a community with a shared future for mankind."

Wang Bo, dean of the Beijing-based University of International Business and Economics' School of International Development and Cooperation, said that as a significant gap still exists between developing countries and developed ones in terms of modernization,

the modernization of the Global South plays a key role in achieving global common development and prosperity.

"For a long time, the international order led by Western countries has posed many obstacles to the modernization of the Global South," Wang said.

"Hegemonism, unilateral economic sanctions and the practice of double standards on human rights issues are all factors that hinder this process," he said, noting that the modernization China pursues has presented a new vision, which is different from the path of Western countries.

The Belt and Road Initiative and the major global initiatives that China has put forward provide an important platform for Global South countries to board the express train of China's development, in order to achieve their own development and facilitate the modernization drive of the Global South, he added.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

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Model: DeepSeek success shows broader vibrancy of China's AI ecosystem

From page 1

Techniques such as model pruning, quantization and knowledge distillation have been employed to reduce the size and complexity of AI models while maintaining high levels of accuracy, enabling Chinese AI to operate efficiently on less-advanced hardware, effectively bypassing the need for top-tier chips.

For instance, DeepSeek has been designed to perform exceptionally well on Nvidia's H800 chips, which are less powerful than the top-notch H100 chips used by large language models such as ChatGPT. This achievement underscores the ingenuity of Chinese researchers and their ability to adapt to constrained environments.

Another critical aspect of China's AI strategy has been the development of domestic hardware alternatives. Companies such as Huawei have made significant strides in designing and producing AI-specific chips, such as the Ascend series. While these chips may not yet

match the performance of their international counterparts, they are steadily narrowing the gap and providing a viable foundation for China's AI ambitions. Substantial investments in cloud computing and distributed computing infrastructure, which allow AI models to scale using networks of lower-performance processors, are also essential.

China's rise as an AI powerhouse is exemplified by its growing portfolio of cutting-edge AI models and technologies. Among these, DeepSeek has garnered significant attention for its ability to push the boundaries of AI capabilities despite hardware limitations. Alongside other domestic AI models, such as Doubao, Kimi, Wenxin Yiyan and Tongyi Qianwen, they represent China's determination to forge a unique developmental path in the face of adversity.

The success of DeepSeek and other Chinese AI models highlights the importance of optimizing both hardware and software to achieve breakthroughs in AI. Focusing on

algorithmic efficiency and leveraging domestic hardware solutions demonstrate that innovation can thrive even under significant constraints.

DeepSeek stands out as a prime example of China's innovative capacity in the AI domain. Built on advanced machine learning algorithms and extensive datasets, it excels in natural language processing, image recognition and predictive analytics. Since the release of its third iteration, DeepSeek has gained recognition for its exceptional capabilities, positioning itself as a strong contender against OpenAI's ChatGPT.

What sets DeepSeek apart is its ability to deliver high performance despite operating on less advanced hardware. This breakthrough not only showcases the technical prowess of Chinese engineers but also serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for innovation in resource-constrained environments.

DeepSeek's success is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a reflection of the broader vibrancy of China's AI ecosystem. Other domes-

tic AI models are also making significant strides in their respective domains. For example, Doubao by ByteDance is widely used in customer service and education; Kimi, a multimodal model, seamlessly integrates texts, images and audio files; Wenxin Yiyan by Baidu rivals ChatGPT in natural language understanding and generation; Tongyi Qianwen by Alibaba delivers tailored solutions for the e-commerce and logistics sectors with strong potential for localization.

These models collectively highlight the strength of China's AI industry and its ability to cater to the specific needs of domestic industries and consumers. Moreover, they underscore the importance of fostering a diverse and competitive AI ecosystem that can drive innovation on a global scale.

China's AI advancements are not confined to its borders, as they are increasingly making an impact on the global stage. Chinese AI technologies are expanding into markets in the Global South, where they are being integrated into

healthcare, agriculture and education. By addressing local challenges and providing scalable solutions, these technologies are helping to bridge the digital divide and promote sustainable development.

The growing influence of Chinese AI also highlights the interconnectedness of global technological development. As China continues to innovate and overcome hardware constraints, it is expected to challenge the dominance of US artificial intelligence models and companies soon, fostering a more diverse, open, inclusive and fair competitive global AI ecosystem. This healthy competition is not only driving innovation but also accelerating technological progress, ultimately benefiting industries and consumers worldwide. That will ensure AI technologies serve as a shared resource, contributing to the construction of a more equitable and sustainable future.

China's ability to overcome hardware constraints and achieve significant advancements in AI underscores the limitations of tech-

nology embargoes as a tool to stifle innovation in the 21st century. While chip restrictions may temporarily slow progress, they have also spurred greater creativity. The story of DeepSeek and China's broader AI achievements is not just about technology; it is a testament to the enduring power of human ingenuity and the futility of attempts to contain it.

As the global AI landscape continues to evolve, China's contributions serve as a reminder of the importance of resilience, innovation and collaboration. By fostering an environment that encourages fair competition and shared progress, the international community can ensure that AI technologies are developed and deployed in ways that benefit all of humanity.

In this globalized context, the story of China's AI journey is not just a national narrative but a chapter in the broader story of human progress.

The author is a public affairs specialist and international affairs commentator based in Hong Kong. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

CHINA

Cultural show



Performers dressed as Monkey King and God of Fortune scatter flower petals during a cultural performance celebrating the West Lake Winter Jasmine Exhibition at Qianwang Temple Scenic Area in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, on Thursday. The exhibition opened on Thursday, showcasing a variety of events such as outdoor and indoor floral displays, a jasmine flower market, as well as folk customs and festive performances to entertain tourists. LI ZHONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Nation deepens ASEAN health ties

By ZHANG LI in Nanning
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China initiated its first cross-border pharmaceutical centralized procurement platform recently, aiming to expand access to quality medicines and strengthen healthcare ties with Southeast Asian nations.

The platform, launched on Jan 9 in the coastal city of Fangchenggang in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, is seen as a major step in healthcare collaboration between China and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Under the guidance of China's National Healthcare Security Administration, the platform will manage the entire procurement process, from bulk buying to account settlement for medicines and medical supplies.

"China has been consistently promoting the centralized and volume-based procurement of medicines," Shi Zihai, deputy director of the NHSA, said at the launch ceremony. He noted that 10 rounds of national centralized purchasing have already been conducted, covering 435 types of medicines, including drugs for chronic diseases and cancer.

The initiative is designed to deepen cooperation with members of the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly ASEAN nations, offering new opportunities for collaboration in healthcare and enhancing the well-being of people in both regions, Shi said.

The platform also aims to accelerate the development of the International Medical Opening-up Pilot Zone (China) in Fangchenggang, established in 2019 near the China-Vietnam border. The zone focuses on medical innovation and international healthcare cooperation, particularly with ASEAN nations and members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Leveraging its proximity to ASEAN countries, Guangxi plans to transform the platform into a hub for information exchange, technology sharing, trade facilitation and talent development, said Liao Pinhu, vice-chairman of the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

The platform will streamline the entry of Chinese medicines and medical supplies into ASEAN markets while exploring innovative methods for overseas drug purchases. It is expected to meet the needs of Guangxi residents seeking treatment outside their home province, insured individuals requiring real-time online medicine purchases and cross-border patients from ASEAN countries.

Experts and industry representatives from Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia and other ASEAN nations convened with Chinese representatives the same day for a seminar on China-ASEAN pharmaceutical procurement.

AS700 airship set to enter service this year

Chinese-developed aircraft to be used for aerial tours of domestic scenic areas

By ZHAO LEI in Taijiang, Guizhou
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The AS700, the largest airship ever developed in China, is set to begin commercial operations this year, according to a project leader at Aviation Industry Corp of China, the country's leading aircraft manufacturer.

Zhang Lixian, Party chief of the Special Aircraft Research Institute, an AVIC subsidiary based in Jingmen, Hubei province, said Thursday that the institute has received confirmed orders for 23 AS700 airships and tentative orders for 164 more.

The first customer for the AS700 will be Guangxi Guilin Fangzhou General Aviation, a private company in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

"We have started small-scale production of the AS700. The first unit is scheduled for delivery to the Guangxi company around October and will be used for aerial sightseeing," Zhang said during an event in Taijiang county, Guizhou province.

An AS700 made a flight to Taijiang on Monday to appear during the "Village Basketball Association", a basketball event held in Tai-pan village, which concluded on Thursday.

Guangxi Guilin Fangzhou General Aviation has placed orders for six AS700s, while China Comfort Travel Group has ordered 16, and Jingmen Urban Investment and Construction Co has purchased one, Zhang said.

Training programs for airship pilots will begin soon, he added. "There are very few pilots in China who have flown airships because there has been almost no manned airship operation in this country."

Zhang's institute is the only State-owned research body in China that designs and manufactures airships. Since the mid-1980s, it has developed various manned and unmanned models. One of its manned airships, the FK-4, participated in the 1990 Beijing Asian Games.

However, commercial operations

of manned airships did not take off in China due to factors such as stringent control of low-altitude airspace and limited market demand.

That situation began to change in recent years as the central government sought to unlock the market potential of low-altitude airspace.

Development of the AS700 began in August 2018 to meet demand for aerial sightseeing.

Powered by piston engines, the AS700 has a maximum takeoff weight of 4.15 metric tons, a top speed of 100 kilometers per hour and a flight ceiling of 3.1 km. It can carry one pilot and nine passengers, fly up to 700 km and remain airborne for as long as 10 hours.

Following extensive test flights, the AS700 received its type certificate from the Civil Aviation Administration of China in December 2023, becoming the first manned airship in China to be domestically certified.

In addition to tourism, the AS700 is suited for a range of civilian applications, including mineral prospecting, marine surveillance, police patrols, cargo transport and emergency rescue, according to its designers.

HPV vaccine made available for males

By ZHOU WENTING in Shanghai
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Shanghai and several other cities in China, including Nanjing and Suzhou in Jiangsu province, Fuzhou in Fujian province, and Chengdu in Sichuan province, started administering human papillomavirus vaccines to their male populations last week.

While HPV infection is often discussed as a concern for women, experts have emphasized that vaccinating males against HPV is crucial in preventing virus transmission and related diseases in men and protecting their partners.

The quadrivalent HPV vaccine, developed by multinational pharmaceutical company Merck, was approved on Jan 8 for males on the Chinese mainland. The vaccine targets HPV types 6, 11, 16 and 18.

The vaccine is available to females age 9 to 45 and males age 9 to 26. It requires three doses, costing around 800 yuan (\$109) per shot.

Experts pointed out that while persistent infection with high-risk HPV types is widely known as the primary cause of cervical cancer in women, less attention is given to the impact of HPV on men.

"HPV types 6 and 11 are responsible for nearly 90 percent of genital warts, and HPV types 16 and 18 cause nearly 90 percent of anal cancers," said Sui Long, chief physician

“Expanding vaccination to include both genders, rather than limiting it to women, will significantly reduce HPV infection rates.”

Huang Zhuoying, official with the Shanghai Center for Disease Control and Prevention

at the cervical disease diagnosis and treatment center of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital of Fudan University in Shanghai.

Sui added that HPV-related cancers and genital warts in men are often diagnosed at advanced stages due to the lack of routine early screening. Recent data from the Chinese population indicates that the HPV infection rate in men is higher than in women.

A study cited by media outlet The Paper.cn, based on the population of the United States, estimated that the lifetime probability of HPV infection for people with at least one heterosexual partner is 91.3 percent in men and 84.6 percent in women.

"The first peak of HPV infection in males occurs between ages 18 and 24," said Huang Zhuoying, deputy

Steady progress seen in environment protection

By HOU LIQIANG
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Despite facing challenges in environmental protection amid efforts to boost its economic recovery, China has made consistent progress over the past year, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment has said.

In 2024, the average density of PM2.5 particulate matter in the country's 339 major cities was 29.3 micrograms per cubic meter, down 2.7 percent year-on-year, the ministry said in a statement issued after its annual work conference that was held recently.

This means the concentration of the air pollutants that can penetrate deeply into the lungs has remained below China's interim national standard of 35 mcg/cubic meter for five straight years, it said.

The ministry also revealed that the proportion of days with "fairly good" air quality — considered to be below 100 on the 0-500 air quality index scale — in the country reached 87.2 percent last year, up 1.7 percentage points from the previous year.

The accomplishment was attributed to a series of initiatives implemented by the ministry to advance efforts to ensure blue skies.

Roughly 2 million rural households in northern China said farewell to coal as a heating source last year, the statement said. Approximately 80 percent of the nation's crude steel production capacity has undergone either comprehensive ultra-low emission transfor-

mations or targeted upgrades in key segments of their production processes.

The statement also noted unprecedented improvements in the quality of the country's surface water. About 90.4 percent of surface water nationwide was reported to be of fairly good quality last year, a 1 percentage point increase from 2023, the ministry stated.

It was the first time that the proportion of fairly good quality water across the country exceeded 90 percent.

China has a five-tier quality system for surface water, with Grade I the best.

The country has seen black and odorous water bodies essentially eradicated in urban areas of cities at and above the prefecture level, the ministry said. In the nation's county seats, 80 percent of heavily polluted water bodies have been treated.

The ministry pledged a series of measures to forge ahead with the country's "Beautiful China" initiative.

A priority for the ministry in 2025 is to further deepen the reform of the country's mechanisms to work toward the realization of an ecological civilization, a concept promoted by President Xi Jinping for balanced and sustainable development that features harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

The ministry also aims to spearhead technological innovation in environmental protection and bolster the nation's environmental monitoring system.

Robot trainer



Students perform calisthenics with a robot during a humanoid robot sports meeting held in Mianyang, Sichuan province, on Thursday. CHEN DONGDONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Study reveals how plants identify 'beneficial friend'

By ZHOU WENTING in Shanghai
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Scientists in Shanghai have unraveled how plants distinguish between beneficial and harmful microbes in soil at the molecular level, a discovery that could significantly impact green agriculture and global food security.

Plants host a variety of microorganisms in their root systems. While symbiotic fungi establish mutually beneficial relationships with plants and aid in absorbing essential nutrients from the soil, pathogens deplete these nutrients, leading to reduced crop yields and plant death.

By understanding how plants differentiate between "friend" and "foe", researchers aim to develop crop cultivation methods that reduce the need for environmentally harmful fertilizers, maintain yields and enhance resilience.

Researchers at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Center for Excellence in Molecular Plant Sciences in Shanghai identified LysM receptor kinases on plant cell membranes as key in detecting molecular signals from microbes. These signals trigger either symbiotic or immune responses. The team's findings, published in international journals from 2015 to 2024, have shed light on this complex mechanism.

However, the abundance of LysM receptor kinases in flowering plants and their overlapping functions complicate the understanding of how plants precisely distinguish between microbes. To address this, the scientists turned to *Marchantia*

paleacea, also known as a common spleen moss, an early land plant with a simpler genome and fewer LysM receptors, making it an ideal model for their study.

The research identified two LysM receptor kinases in common spleen moss — MpaLYR and MpaCERK1 — that act as sensors to distinguish between symbiotic and pathogenic microbes and activate distinct responses.

Under low-phosphorus conditions, the researchers found plants release a hormone that prompts symbiotic fungi to secrete large quantities of short-chain chitin oligomers. These molecules are recognized by MpaLYR, triggering symbiotic responses while inhibiting immune responses to long-chain chitin oligomers from pathogenic fungi.

"This process is like a teacher taking roll call in a classroom," said Wang Ertao, a lead researcher on the team. "Only symbiotic fungi respond to the hormone and release symbiotic signals, attracting them to the plant to aid in the absorption of water and nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen."

This dynamic balance between symbiosis and immunity allows plants to adapt to diverse environments, acquire nutrients through symbiosis and maintain effective defenses against pathogens.

The findings, published Friday on the website of the journal Cell, open new possibilities for improving crop growth efficiency. Scientists can now enhance plant secretion of strigolactones (the hormone) to attract symbiotic fungi over pathogens, Wang said.

CHINA

Young scientists pinpoint key challenges

Academic research must connect with users and policymakers, while eliminating distrust

By LIN SHUJUAN in Shanghai
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A collaborative effort by 16 young scientists from 11 countries including China has highlighted five critical challenges facing academic research worldwide.

Their article, published in the academic journal *Innovation* on Jan 2, pointed out issues with public mistrust, disconnect with end-user applications and policymakers, barriers to international collaboration and a reliance on conventional metrics of performance.

These threats, exacerbated by global events such as the pandemic, geopolitical tensions and shifts in media environments, are impeding innovation and breakthroughs in academic research worldwide, said the authors of the article, titled "A Call to Action to Address Escalating

Global Threats to Academic Research". The authors were also from the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, Australia, Turkey and Belgium.

To address these escalating threats to scientific progress, the article urges global cooperation to bridge gaps in scientific education and communication, fostering an environment where scientific exploration is seen as a cornerstone of civic engagement.

It emphasizes the importance of establishing meaningful connections between the academic community and the public, media, industry partners, international collaborators, policymakers and university leaders.

Prioritizing diversity is highlighted as essential to integrating a broader range of perspectives and



We believe the time for ensuring, defending integrity and creativity in research is now and not in the future."

Fun Man Fung, assistant professor at the School of Chemistry at University College Dublin

expertise into academic research, ultimately strengthening the bridge between science and society.

"The reinvigoration of academia is dependent on the collective efforts of academics worldwide. Our colleagues are encouraged to join the mission of advocating for

change to bring benefits to individual researchers, academic institutions and society as a whole," the article read.

The genesis of this article can be traced back to the 6th World Laureates Forum held in Shanghai from Nov 6 to 8, 2023.

The summit brought together over 300 scientists from 25 countries and regions, including 27 Nobel laureates, 40 Chinese academicians and over 120 young scientists. Through interdisciplinary discussions, the participants explored progress in global academic research and identified common challenges faced by the academic community.

The authors, including Fun Man Fung, assistant professor at the School of Chemistry at University College Dublin, and Gaelle Offranc Piret from the French National

Institute of Health and Medical Research, initiated the idea during the summit, which resonated with like-minded peers from around the world.

"Lots of things limiting academic science achievements seemed linked to science being disconnected from people, policymakers and the private sector, whereas the future of the three of them is very dependent on academic science," Fung said. "We believe the time for ensuring, defending integrity and creativity in research is now and not in the future."

Following intense discussions at the summit, interested young scientists formed WeChat and email groups, shifting the discussions from in-person to online platforms, with biweekly brainstorming sessions and round-the-clock collaborative editing across different time

zones. The collaborative effort that led to the article spanned over a year.

"I'm very proud that we could achieve this, mainly because the message we have is very important and we point out a problem to which we suggest a systemic and international solution," Piret said. "We do hope this call of action can reach out to all people concerned by this paper around the world: not only scientists, but also citizens, public policymakers, private companies or banks."

Joy Wolfram from the University of Queensland, who was the corresponding author of the article, echoed the sentiment.

"We value the public's support of academic research. Without this support we are unable to make scientific discoveries that improve and save lives," Wolfram said.



Huang Yahui conducts a butterfly survey in the Altun Mountain National Nature Reserve in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Population study of snow leopards show feasibility of survey methodology

XINING — Chinese researchers have surveyed snow leopard populations across approximately 360,000 square kilometers on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, estimating a population size of 1,002 of the rare species in the area.

Organizations including Peking University, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and the Shan Shui Conservation Center carried out the assessment in the Sanjiangyuan area, Northwest China's Qinghai province, and the article about their findings was published in the international journal of *Biodiversity and Conservation* on Jan 11.

This is the first time China has completed a major snow leopard population assessment and represents the largest snow leopard survey published globally, said Xiao Lingyun, an assistant professor at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and a co-author of the article.

The study was based on existing infrared camera survey data from 12 monitoring sites from 2015 to 2021, during which time four organizations, including the Shan Shui Conservation Center, collected nearly 10,000 snow leopard activity records. The results indicate that within the surveyed area, over 110,000 sq km are potentially suitable habitats for snow leopards.

The average population density of snow leopards in these habitats is about 0.9 individuals per 100 square km, with an estimated total population of around 1,002 individuals, said Xiao.

"This survey has confirmed the feasibility of large-scale rare species population estimation, providing crucial data support and scientific basis for the global conservation efforts of the snow leopard," she said.

Known as the "king of the snow mountains", the snow leopard is under first-class national protection in China and is listed as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

China is home to about 60 percent of the world's snow leopard habitats. The Sanjiangyuan area is one of the most densely populated areas for snow leopards in the country and the world.

However, the elusive nature and vast activity range of the species make accurate population assessment difficult.

Zhao Xiang, conservation director of the Shan Shui Conservation Center, said that based on the previous global snow leopard population estimate, which was between 7,446 and 7,996 individuals, the estimate in the Sanjiangyuan area in this assessment accounts for more than 10 percent of the world's snow leopard population, highlighting the extremely high conservation value in the area.

This study also provides technical references for future large-scale snow leopard surveys in more areas, said Zhao.

XINHUA



Scientists conduct a snow leopard survey in 2021. XINHUA



An infrared camera photo of a snow leopard taken on March 15, 2023. XINHUA

Passion for butterflies prompts life-changing decision

URUMQI — Huang Yahui, 40, has been fascinated by nature since childhood, a passion she developed in her 20s by engaging in adventurous outdoor activities.

Then in 2011, she chanced upon a life-changing opportunity to volunteer with a research team led by Ma Ming, a professor at the Xinjiang Institute of Ecology and Geography, Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Huang spent several months engaging in fieldwork alongside the team, immersing herself in bird observation and conservation efforts, and deepening her interest in environmental preservation.

That brief experience helped shape her future career.

"When the fragile golden eagle, raised under our care, spread its wings and soared into the sky, I felt a deep sense of responsibility to protect the ecological environment of my hometown and dedicate myself to preserving biodiversity," recalled Huang, a native of Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

She is now a full-time wildlife conservationist and cofounder of a nature conservation and science popularization center in Saybag district in the regional capital Urumqi. The center is dedicated to heightening environmental awareness and conservation efforts.

From March to November each year, Huang and her colleagues live and work outdoors, equipped with camping gear, cameras, binoculars and notebooks. They trek through the forests, mountains and plateau areas across Xinjiang.

She has developed a strong passion for butterflies and, over the past decade, has actively worked to record their habitats and compile ecological conservation reports, documenting hundreds of butterfly species.

According to zoologists, butterflies are an indicator species for cli-



From left: *Parnassius apollo* seen in Ili prefecture, Xinjiang. *Iphiclydes podalirius* found in Tacheng prefecture, Xinjiang. PHOTOS BY HUANG YAHUI / FOR CHINA DAILY



mate change. Butterflies have a relatively simple body structure and are highly sensitive to slight climate changes throughout their life cycle, which includes stages from egg to larva to imago, Huang explained.

"Therefore, changes in population structure, numbers, phenological period, habits and habitats of butterflies can reflect regional climate change," she said.

However, due to the high diversity and abundance of butterfly species, as well as the migratory patterns and regional variability among certain species, relying solely on scientific researchers for butterfly observation is insufficient. According to Ma, ecological conservation organizations play a vital role in establishing butterfly observation networks.

Over the years, Huang's team has actively contributed to this effort.

One summer day, while exploring the Tianshan Mountains in Xinjiang, Huang and her colleagues spot-

ted a snow-white butterfly with wings adorned with shimmering spots, resembling the "eyes" found on peacock feathers.

"It's the *Parnassius loxias*. I found it," Huang exclaimed with excitement. This species was first documented by an ecologist over a century ago.

"I took photographs and notes, feeling as though I were conversing with butterflies alongside biologists from more than 100 years ago," Huang said.

Over the last decade, Huang and her colleagues have recorded more than 200 butterfly species and submitted their research findings to local forestry and grassland departments and research institutions, providing vital data for biodiversity conservation.

They have also worked to raise awareness of biodiversity conservation among primary and secondary students across Xinjiang, helping guide them in understanding the

importance of nature.

"We tell the students how animals like butterflies, squirrels and snow leopards forage and set up homes. They listen with great interest," she said. "I hope the children can realize that wildlife is our friend."

Additionally, as human activities, such as overgrazing, have fragmented some wildlife habitats, Huang's team has worked to raise awareness among herders, assisting them in restoring grazing land to grassland.

Since herders from several ethnic minority groups have a tradition of crafting leather carvings and felt paintings, the team has launched targeted design initiatives to help them create more marketable handmade products, boosting their income.

Chi Lupeng, a member of Huang's team and a graduate of the China Academy of Art, has been helping herders design innovative leather artworks. "Our goal is to enhance the artisanship of the herders and strengthen online promotion so that more people can discover Xinjiang and its folk crafts, thereby expanding the market for products from pastoral areas," Chi said.

In 2023, Huang was named one of the 100 "most outstanding ecological environment protection volunteers" by authorities including the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.

Currently, Huang is working on a book about butterfly conservation that integrates the traditional culture of the 24 Chinese solar terms.

"I want to write about the habitats of 24 butterfly species and the corresponding ecological protection stories. My goal is to help more people understand the importance of harmony between humanity and nature, and encourage efforts in protecting nature and biodiversity," she said.

XINHUA

Earthquake relief efforts boost spirits in Xizang

Support from all walks of life provides vital aid, assistance to disaster-hit communities

By YUAN SHENGGAO

On Jan 7, a 6.8-magnitude earthquake hit Dingri county in Shigatse of the Xizang autonomous region at 9:05 am.

Dingri is home to the northern base camp of the world's highest peak, Mount Qomolangma, also known around the world as Mount Everest.

The quake struck from a depth of 10 kilometers, while the epicenter was monitored at 28.5 degrees north latitude and 87.45 degrees east longitude, said a report issued by the China Earthquake Networks Center. The epicenter is 34 km from Dinggye county, 36 km from Dingri county, 164 km from Shigatse city and 379 km from the regional capital Lhasa. There are seven villages located within a 5-km radius around the epicenter.

House collapses were reported in the affected areas including Dramso, Chulho and Tsogo townships, and communication and electricity in some areas were cut off. In addition to Dingri, another four neighboring counties — Lhaze, Sa'kya, Saga and Dinggye — were affected. Latest statistics show that a total of 126 people were killed and more than 300 were injured during the earthquake. The total number affected reached 61,500.

Rescue and relief efforts were immediately carried out to assist those affected by the earthquake.

The autonomous region's government and public institutions, as well as the business community and volunteer organizations, have launched an emergency response, mobilizing a great number of personnel, equipment and search dogs for rescue.

At a news conference on Jan 16, which was jointly held by Xizang's departments of emergency response, healthcare, transportation and housing, and the government of Shigatse, officials said a large number of supplies, including food, medicines, tents, beds, clothes, blankets, cooking utensils, fuel and heating equipment have been delivered to the residents of affected areas.

Wei Jun, deputy chief of the Xizang Department of Emergency Management, said at the conference that the current main task is to help the disaster-affected residents move into temporary shelters like assembled makeshift houses and tents, which are crucial to help people overcome the coldness of winter, as soon as possible.

He said materials that are capable of assembling 13,000 makeshift houses have been delivered to, or are on the way to, the earthquake-hit areas. More than 5,000 temporary houses are in place in these areas.

An official at the Xizang Health Commission said that two makeshift hospitals and 79 medical service stations have been set up in the areas to serve the residents in need. More than 200 medics were working at these facilities.

People from all walks of life and from across the country are doing everything they can to aid in the disaster relief efforts.

Lhamo Drolma, an official at the Xizang Department of Civil Affairs, said that as of Jan 15, donations to the earthquake-affected areas amounted to 1.64 billion yuan (\$224 million), including 1.53 billion yuan in cash and 106 million yuan worth of supplies.

It is worth mentioning that an oxygen supply cabin designed for high-altitude areas was used to relieve discomfort caused by hypoxia in the quake-affected areas of Dingri county. Jointly created by the Xizang branch of China Railway Construction Heavy Industry and the Xizang branch of China Anneng Construction Group, the oxygen supply cabin has greatly improved the working conditions for seismic rescue personnel in high-altitude environment and provided much-needed medical assistance spaces for disaster-affected people.

The cabin can accommodate more than 10 people at a time.

Rescuer Li Ruichao said he experienced chest tightness, dizziness and other discomfort after arriving in Zingkar village of Dingri. He underwent oxygen therapy in the oxygen supply cabin.

These efforts have led to the immediate and steady recovery of the quake-affected areas.

"Generally speaking, after staying here for half an hour, one can recover from discomfort and resume the seismic rescue tasks immediately," said Li.

Mobile communication signals in the most severely affected townships of Tsogo, Dramso and Chulho of Dingri county have all been restored by the night of Jan 7, the same day that the earthquake happened, said the region's telecom operators.

As of Jan 14, residents of the earthquake-hit areas in Dingri county, had moved into the more than 3,500 newly assembled temporary houses, and the rest were relocated to other temporary shelters like tents, according to local media reports.

A day after Guring village in Dramso township was struck by the earthquake, residents were all relocated to the temporary shelters. Despite temperatures as low as -16 C, and the dire memory of the disaster, residents found their lives basically returned to normal thanks to the efforts of the government, rescuers and volunteers as well as other people and entities from all over the country.

At a relief camp in the village, children waited in line for a meal of eggs, while older people tried to put to rest the memories of the disaster.

Sangye, a 55-year-old who held a prayer wheel and chanted scriptures, was among the seniors trying to pacify the others.

"Natural disasters can't be avoided. Although our house collapsed, my family was brought to a warm tent last night, and we were able to sleep," Sangye said, thanking relief and rescue workers for their untiring efforts to resettle people.

Unfortunately, it was an uneasy night on Jan 7 for Penba Norbu, deputy head of Dramso township. He



Rescue workers in action at Paljor village in Dramso township, Dingri county, which is among the hardest-hit by the Jan 7 earthquake. HU ZIKUI / XINHUA

recalled how he felt the strong shaking of his dormitory and noticed walls cracking before he ran outside. The township officials formed groups to check the villages and take part in the rescue.

When he arrived at Tsa village, Penba Norbu saw a child whose head was bleeding, some people with broken legs and those trapped under the debris of collapsed houses.

Six out of 464 people living in the village died, but the others were rescued. When a series of aftershocks rocked the area, he sent out a notice on WeChat, reminding villagers to take care and report any damage.

Penba Norbu said he felt relieved after the professional medical and rescue teams arrived, and the villagers were moved to temporary shelters. "There are enough tents and daily necessities. We can get through this," he added.

At a news conference held in Shigatse on Jan 8, Hong Li, head of the Xizang Emergency Management Department, said about 12,000 people participated in the rescue and relief efforts, including public security personnel, the armed police, forest firefighters, medics and the military. Together, they rescued 407 trapped individuals, he said.

A total of 187 relocation sites have been established in Dingri and 46,500 people have been moved. The 484 tourists who were visiting the county left the place as of the noon of that day, Hong added.

The relief tents are equipped with folding beds, cotton blankets, heaters, generators, stoves and emergency lighting, while people staying there have been provided with coats and warm footwear, besides food and medicines, the official said.

"The area is at a high altitude and is bitterly cold. We need to guarantee basic living conditions for the affected people, keep them warm and help them rebuild their homes as soon as possible," he added.

All tents and makeshift houses inhabited by residents affected by the earthquake in Dingri county were provided with a stable power supply by the afternoon of Jan 11, according to State Grid Xizang Electric Power Co.

In the wake of the earthquake, State Grid Xizang swiftly mobilized its resources to ensure affected areas received an uninterrupted supply of electricity, undertaking urgent repair and restoration tasks, a company representative said.

Despite harsh conditions and logistical challenges, the dedicated



Above: local residents, officials and rescuers attend a memorial service in Changkar village in Dingri county's Dramso township. TENZIN NYIDA / XINHUA



A rescuer comforts a child in Tsogo township, Dingri county, during a break from his rescue work. JIGME DORJE / XINHUA

“There are enough tents and daily necessities. We can get through this.”

Penba Norbu, deputy head of Dramso, one of the townships severely hit by the earthquake

team worked tirelessly to restore electricity to the resettlement sites and provide essential relief to affected residents.

Wang Tianyou, an employee of the State Grid Lhokha Power Supply Co, said he and his colleagues are proud to have contributed to the rescue and recovery efforts for disaster-stricken communities.

Tan Xiangdong, deputy director of the Xizang Health Commission, said at the Jan 8 news conference in Shigatse that doctors from Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu in Sichuan province had arrived in the region to treat those in critical condition.

Special teams have also arrived to test water quality, disinfect the environment and promote health awareness among residents to prevent an epidemic, he added.

Days after the earthquake, easing the trauma of those who were affected by the disaster became a new focus of the local officials, medics and volunteers, as well as residents.

On the morning of Jan 13, a memorial service was held in Dingri county to mourn the victims.

At 9:30 am, hundreds of people, including government officials, rescue workers and local residents, attended the event in the county's Dramso township, the worst-hit area. They removed their hats and stood in silence for three minutes to honor the deceased.

In the aftermath, joint efforts from all sectors of society have been carried out for the rescue and relief work in the affected areas. Mental health relief teams have also been

working diligently to ease post-disaster trauma.

On Jan 12, a special event was held at a resettlement site for quake victims in Changkar, Dingri. The Psychological Rescue Team of the Red Cross Society of China Sichuan Branch organized a group birthday party for six children born in January, which also attracted more than 30 children from three nearby resettlement areas.

Team members sang the birthday song, danced and cut a cake with the children inside a tent, creating a warm and joyful atmosphere despite the dusty and windy weather.

Changkar village in Dramso was one of the areas severely affected by the quake. Six villagers lost their lives, and most of the houses there were either severely damaged or destroyed.

Song Yao, head of the psychological relief team, said the birthday party aimed to help Changkar children recover from the trauma caused by the disaster and to bring warmth to others in the surrounding areas.

Song's team also organized soccer games, singing sessions and painting activities for the village children on Jan 12.

On Jan 13, Panchen Rinpoche, one of the most influential figures in Tibetan Buddhism, chanted scriptures and prayed with fellow monks for the earthquake victims, hoping that they recover quickly from the disaster and rebuild their homes, according to Xinhua News Agency.



From left: Disaster relief workers install a bed at a resettlement community in Tsogo township. SHERAB LHAWON / FOR CHINA DAILY A child in Chulho township, Dingri county, kisses Tan Xiren, a psychologist from the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, who was offering psychological recovery services in the earthquake-hit areas. SHEN HANBO / XINHUA A volunteer from Gansu province serves residents beef noodles at a settlement in Tsogo township. QIU XINGXIANG / XINHUA



GLOBAL LENS



From left: A staff member of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2025 holds a snake-styled toy in Davos, Switzerland, on Jan 21. XING YI / CHINA DAILY People display their Chinese names at a Spring Festival temple fair in Budapest, Hungary, on Jan 20. CHEN HAO / XINHUA US students dance at a Spring Festival gala in Washington DC held by the Chinese embassy in the US on Jan 11. SHA HANTING / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



Dragon dancers perform during the Chinese New Year gala in Nairobi, Kenya, on Jan 19. ZHANG XI / CHINA DAILY

RED BLANKETS OF JOY

The planet celebrates as the Year of the Snake nears

By CHINA DAILY

As Spring Festival approaches, much of the planet is decked in red — red scrolls, red lanterns and red decorations that symbolize good fortune.

The vibrant red displays and fireworks that are now ubiquitous trace their origins to an ancient Chinese tale. It is said that a fearsome creature called *nian*, meaning year, once terrorized villages, preying on people and livestock at the turn of the year. To drive *nian* away, people set off fireworks and decorated their homes in red, believing this would frighten the beast into retreat.

Today that red blanket covers many parts of the globe, not only keeping ancient traditions alive but also reflecting the growing global influence of Spring Festival.

About a fifth of the world's people celebrate the festival in some form or other, and nearly 20 countries have designated the festival as a public holiday.

The coming Chinese New Year, the Year of the Snake, begins on Jan 29. Celebrations for the Spring Festival last for 15 days, ending with Lantern Festival on Feb 12, giving full play to family gatherings, feasts and various cultural activities.

New beginnings

This year's festival has taken on extra significance, being the first since UNESCO added "Spring Festival, social practices of the Chinese people in celebration of the traditional New Year" to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity last month.

"The spring festival promotes family values, social cohesion and peace while providing a sense of identity and continuity for the Chinese people," UNESCO said.



Top: Nepali and Chinese artists perform in Kathmandu on Jan 19 as part of the Chinese New Year celebration. SANJIT PARIYAR VIA GETTY IMAGES Above from left: Ethiopian girls hold red papers with the Chinese character fu, meaning happiness, during the Chinese New Year celebration at the Friendship Square in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. LIU FANGQIANG / XINHUA An employee decorates a subtropical greenhouse at the botanical garden of Lomonosov Moscow State University in Russia on Jan 20 in the run-up to the Spring Festival. SOFYA SANDURSKAYA / TASS

"Spring Festival is not only China's most important traditional holiday but also a bridge that connects Chinese culture with the world," said Fu Cong, China's permanent representative to the United Nations in a recent Spring Festival celebration held at UN headquarters in New York.

"From becoming a UN holiday to being inscribed on UNESCO's heritage list, Spring Festival showcases its timeless cultural brilliance while building new bridges for intercultural understanding."

Reflecting on the significance of the Year of the Snake, Fu cited the snake's ability to shed its skin and humanity's resilience in times of crisis.

"In nature the snake symbolizes the wisdom and strength to renew itself amid adversity. This is precisely the quality we need as we face today's challenges."

China is highly committed to multilateralism in handling global issues, Fu said, and over the past year it has practiced true multilateralism, defended the authority of the UN and advanced initiatives that reflect China's wisdom and the way it tackles problems.

"We must embrace the spirit of the snake, shedding old challenges to emerge stronger and more united."

Melissa Fleming, UN under-secretary-general for global communications, said the snake represents "wisdom, intelligence and resilience", qualities she said the world could use over the coming year.

The UN has a vision of a better tomorrow, where "everyone can live in peace, in dignity and in equality on a healthy planet", she said.

Li Junhua, UN under-secretary-general for economic and social affairs, called for unity as the world prepares to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the UN's founding, in June.

"All member states must work together to make 2025 a year not of division but of unity."

Xinhua contributed to this story.

LIFE

Taking a deep dive into Guizhou's ethnic attire

By ERIK NILSSON in Guiyang

There's a folk saying in multiethnic southwestern China that goes: "Costume, a great philosophy of life, is a dialogue between the heart and the outside world and the soul that's worn on the body." It's this discourse between the individual and the societal, and the physical attire which we wrap our spirits that outfits the ethos of the Guizhou Multicolor Art and National Costume Museum.

The museum is a passion project, a nonprofit nongovernmental institution devoted to collecting, displaying, researching and spreading awareness of clothing and accessories made by the region's ethnic groups, especially the 48 that inhabit Guizhou province.

"Most ethnic groups in Guizhou have no written language. Their records are mainly in the form of the needles and threads in women's hands," museum founder Chen Yueqiao says.

"They are dyed, woven and embroidered into patterns on costumes that can be easily transferred. These ethnic histories can be transformed into a cultural symbol on costumes and kept from generation to generation." Some of the most formal costumes, such as those worn for festivals and weddings, take years, or even up to a decade, to complete—in stark contrast to the minimally ornamented clothing designed for hard labor or housework.

The textiles come in the form of everything from brocade and batik to embroidery on linen, silk, cotton,

wool and leather, and are worn accentuated by jewelry and other adornments.

Chen and her team traveled hundreds of kilometers to over 100 villages, including many small settlements hidden deep in the mountains, to gather tens of thousands of items. They amassed a collection of over 3,000 costumes, 2,000 baby carriers and 20,000 samples of embroidery from ethnic groups like the Miao, Yao, Dong, Sui, Li and Bouyei. The collection also includes many of the implements used to make garments and adornments.

The public can visit the 3,000-square-meter exhibition hall, which also serves as a training center for the Guiyang Vocational and Technical College in Guizhou's provincial capital for free. However, the institution's promotion of ethnic attire extends beyond its walls, to the wider world. It has donated 28 outfits to the National Museum of China and 10 pieces of embroidery to UNESCO office in Beijing.

It has also organized exhibitions in two dozen countries, including Mexico, the Czech Republic, Colombia, Denmark, Malta and Brazil. The Guizhou Multicolor Art and National Costume Museum also produces academic papers and popular bilingual books dedicated to expanding understanding of Guizhou's cultural legacies.

These efforts stitch together a unified understanding of human diversity in the province and beyond and ask us to think more deeply about the ways we cover our bodies and, in the process, reveal our souls.

Sounding out



Downtown Guiyang, Guizhou, holds "roadside concerts" that thousands of people attend free of charge every New Year's Eve. Revelers rang in 2025 with singing, dancing, lights and fireworks. YE SHU / FOR CHINA DAILY



Left: Guiyang, Guizhou province, stages fire concerts to ring in the New Year. LAO XINGDAN / FOR CHINA DAILY Middle: Fanjing Mountain's natural and historical legacies stand tall, in every sense. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Right: Guizhou Geological Museum reveals a billion years of Earth's vicissitudes. ZHANG WEIFENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



HOT AND COLD, BUT MOSTLY COOL

Wintertime visitors to the province's slopes and springs can spend days skiing and nights soaking, Erik Nilsson reports in Liupanshui and Tongren, Guizhou.

Wintertime in Guizhou province is a time and place where people move to the silent "song of ice and fire."

Bing yu huo zhi ge is a local saying that refers not to literal music but rather to skiing down the slopes followed by soaking in hot springs. Steam seeps from hot pools to infuse the mist that wreathes mountains in these unique landscapes of limestone pits and peaks.

Guizhou has long been celebrated for its scenic skylines sliced by karst blades and whitened into honeycombs oozing with warm water. But the "song of ice and fire" shows that these fantastical formations can be enjoyed beyond their beauty and offer actual activities during the chillier months of the year.

And even the coldest season isn't really that cold. Rather, the ski trails are known for being relatively cool at around -2 C — just brisk enough to feel refreshing but not biting in ways that sting your skin. In other words, Jack Frost is present but muzzled in Guizhou's winter sports spots. And this means visitors don't need to bundle into so many layers that they need to waddle when they walk.

Liupanshui city, near the provincial capital, Guiyang, has adopted the slogan "cool city of China" to convey this sense of relatively moderate temperatures year-round. It lures visitors with a summertime marathon event and with winter sports at such spots as Plum Mountain, which is China's lowest-latitude ski resort, at 26 degrees north.

The roughly 1-square-kilometer

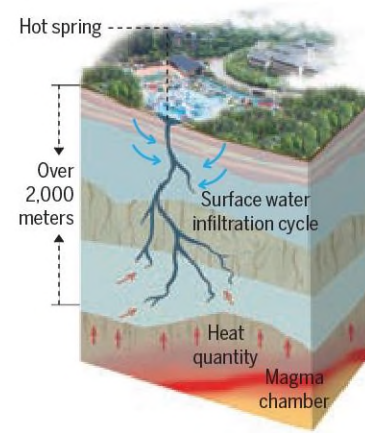
winter sports destination offers nearly 2,000 total meters of ski runs of various difficulty levels that can accommodate up to 5,000 guests at a time.

Newbies, finding their snow legs on the bunny hill, wear not only the regular regalia but can also fasten plush pink pandas or green turtles to pad their backsides and knees. These cute accessories can be handy when roughly as many novices fall as ski downhill, not only cushioning their landings but also keeping their lower halves a bit drier.

The resort hosts competitions, nighttime events and "snow discos" throughout the winter, and hopes more international visitors will participate since Guizhou recently adopted a new 240-hour visa-free

87.5 percent of Guizhou's county-level regions have hot springs

Guizhou province is constellated with over 300 hot spring clusters, encompassing one of the greatest concentrations in the country. They're generally nonvolcanic, unlike those typically found in other parts of southwestern China.



travel policy for visitors from eligible countries.

Skiers can thaw out in one of the more than 300 hot spring clusters that pock Guizhou's undulating limestone landscapes, such as Liupanshui's Baichehe Hot Spring Resort Hotel.

This 27-hectare AAAA attraction features dozens of indoor and outdoor pools that are not only potable but also are said to contain 18 trace minerals, including selenium, copper and strontium, purported to possess myriad health benefits.

A particularly entertaining feature is a large indoor geothermal pool partly bisected by a walkway leading to a stage for performances and karaoke.

Nearby, the Foding Mountain Hot Spring Town in Tongren's Shiqian

hosts over 60 pools of warm water that exhale vapor into the forests that cling to its karsts.

The untreated water is also drinkable and is sold as a bottled brand. It's also used to steep tea and make broth for meals served at the resort. However, they have discontinued the practice of boiling eggs in the actual hot springs.

Various pools are instilled with such substances as rose petals, green tea and milk. Perhaps especially unique are springs that churn with Sichuan peppercorns or with the main base of Guizhou's most famous dish, "sour soup", especially as this pool is brimming with floating toy vegetables like plastic eggplants, corn and garlic.

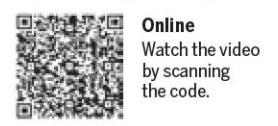
Visitors also heal their skin with special facial masks and exfoliation

treatments in which guests sit in water while swarms of minnows peck dead skin off their feet.

Guizhou's hot springs offer ideal locations to melt away cold and stress and to dissolve into the sometimes-unexpected specialties of local cuisine.

As such, visitors will find that dipping their toes in these pools is to take the final steps of the dance of the "song of ice and fire" that gives rhythm to winter in Guizhou.

Contact the writer at erik_nilsson@chinadaily.com.cn



Where the magical meets the natural

By ERIK NILSSON in Tongren, Guizhou

Monks and monkeys dwell in temples and treetops. Clouded leopards creep through actual clouds that coil like bracelets around two giant stone "hands" pressed together in prayer. Pilgrims bow toward such seeming-supernatural natural wonders as the blazing "Buddha light" aura that irradiates the morning mist.

It's no mystery why mystical Fanjing Mountain in Tongren, Guizhou province, has been hailed as a holy destination for a millennium. Over the past thousand years, Buddhists have tucked hundreds of temples into the crags that cut through the primitive forests fleeing the "Brahma Pure Land", as Fanjing's longer name, Fantian Jintu, translates from Chinese.

That's especially since its emblematic Red Cloud Golden Summit, crowned with a pair of castles that cap two sheer karst columns connected by an arched bridge, appears as if it's straight from the cover of a fantasy novel.

The highest peak of Guizhou province's Wuling Mountain Range

claims the world's largest gold Maitreya Buddha statue, which is about 5 meters tall.

But many of the deities who populate this place are sculpted by the gods. For centuries, people worshipped the 10,000-meter Reclining Maitreya silhouette formed by the contours of several mountains that mesh into one another. And believers built the Guangpu Pavilion next to a waterfall that's believed to resemble the profile of Avalokitesvara bodhisattva, whose magical bottle seems to be traced by moss in the corner.

For centuries, people have also anthropomorphized such formations as the iconic Mushroom Stone, which is synonymous with Fanjing Mountain. The Book-Shaped Rocks are said to be scrolls of scripture that fell from the pack of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) monk Xuanzang, who's also the master of the Monkey King in the classic story, *Journey to the West*.

Such legendary characters live alongside 800 animal and 2,000 plant species, including nearly 20 kinds of endangered fauna and about 30 types of protected flora.

Fanjing Mountain is the only habitat of the world's roughly 800 wild Guizhou snub-nosed golden monkeys, which are rarer than pandas. These primates are colloquially called "Fanjing Mountain ghosts".

Black bears, clouded leopards, Tibetan macaques and giant salamanders also roam alongside less-adored yet still-appreciated mammals, such as forest musk deer, pangolins and Sumatran serows. These creatures wander through 40 biomes, including the world's largest dove tree forest, beneath the canopies formed by such endangered trees as the Fanjing fir, Chinese yew and ginkgo biloba.

These rich cultural and natural legacies have earned Fanjing Mountain UNESCO World Heritage and Biosphere Reserve listings. Consequently, its human history and ecological inheritance are poised to persist for centuries yet to come.



GRAPHICS BY YANG LIU AND TEXT BY LIU BOQIAN / CHINA DAILY

Understanding the land on which we stand

By ERIK NILSSON in Guiyang

You can spend a billion years in a day at Guizhou Geological Museum. But actually a few hours are more than enough to experience eons of Earth's history.

It also offers a venue to do so in a region with a reputation for being among the most geologically flamboyant on our planet. Guizhou is synonymous with the karst spires that stab the skies like spears above complex bases of caves that coil beneath the limestone mountains.

Prized displays include the large

est sea lily fossil found in China; a 26-meter strata wall, revealing contiguous bands of rock as they accumulated over 900 million years; the complete skeleton of a nearly 10-meter-long Gaoqing Ichthyosaurus and its feces, packed with crushed bivalves; and samples of some of the earliest animal embryos, which date back more than 600 million years.

It also has fossils of the province's namesake beast, Guizhouosaurus, which is sometimes (mis)translated to English as the "Guizhou dragon". The *Mysterious Guizhou* hall reveals paleontological treasures, while the *Colorful Guizhou* section examines the province's landscapes. *Rich Guizhou* exhibits the area's wealth of minerals, and *Endeavoring Guizhou* examines the effort

that has gone into surveying and mapping the region, as well as its resource and land management.

Visitors can also walk through a tunnel with projections of ancient sea creatures swimming overhead and experience evolution at a 5D theater.

The 8,800-square-meter exhibition area portrays ancient Earth using modern technology, ranging from microscopes to the metaverse. It helps us understand the land on which we stand, how it has shaped life, and how geology is so much more than just old rocks buried in dirt.

The Guizhou Geological Museum is a world unto itself, dedicated to answering the riddles posed by the planet we all share, positioned in one of its most curious and cryptic locations.

The intriguing tastes of Shuicheng's 'three pots'

By ERIK NILSSON in Liupanshui, Guizhou

Lao guo is a feast that comes from famine. It's a contemporary culinary celebration that hails from deprivation over four centuries ago. The delicacy is one of "three pots" — along with goat meat soup and Cichong chicken hotpot — now gaining growing acclaim beyond the borders of its origins in Shuicheng district, Liupanshui city, Guizhou province.

Lao guo is said to have been created 400 years ago, when Wu Sangui, a Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) general, sent troops to suppress an uprising by the Yi in what is now Shuicheng. The soldiers ran out of food and had to hunt game and forage for vegetables, which they grilled atop roof tiles heated over open flames.

Over the years, people switched out the clay tiles for circular black-iron domes. Their shape allows the juices to drip downward toward the round edge and oil poured on the top to cascade over the morsels of meat, vegetables and tofu that sizzle on the metal.

The specialty continued to evolve as street food served in small roadside stalls until the 1990s, when it started to move into actual restaurants, leading to the emergence of the *Lao Guo* Food Street. Each eatery has its proprietary dipping mixes, typically mingling ground chilies, Sichuan peppercorns, fried salt, powdered peanuts and toasted sesame.

Cichong chicken hotpot similarly takes its namesake from war. It was eaten in Shuicheng since time immemorial but got its name from Cichong village, which was renamed in 1979 to commemorate the Red Army's passage through it during the Long March (1934-36). In the later part of the 20th

century, it became known as a "highway food" appreciated by truck drivers and travelers making stopovers in Shuicheng.

More recently, it also came to populate a "food neighborhood", Cichong Street, Douci Road and the surrounding area host about 30 restaurants specializing in the dish.

Cichong hotpot is acclaimed for its three quality ingredients — chicken, tofu and water. The village's clear and slightly alkaline spring water is said to contain over a dozen minerals, including strontium, zinc and potassium. These are believed to not only offer health and flavor benefits but also endow local tofu with a tender texture that doesn't disintegrate even if boiled for a long time.

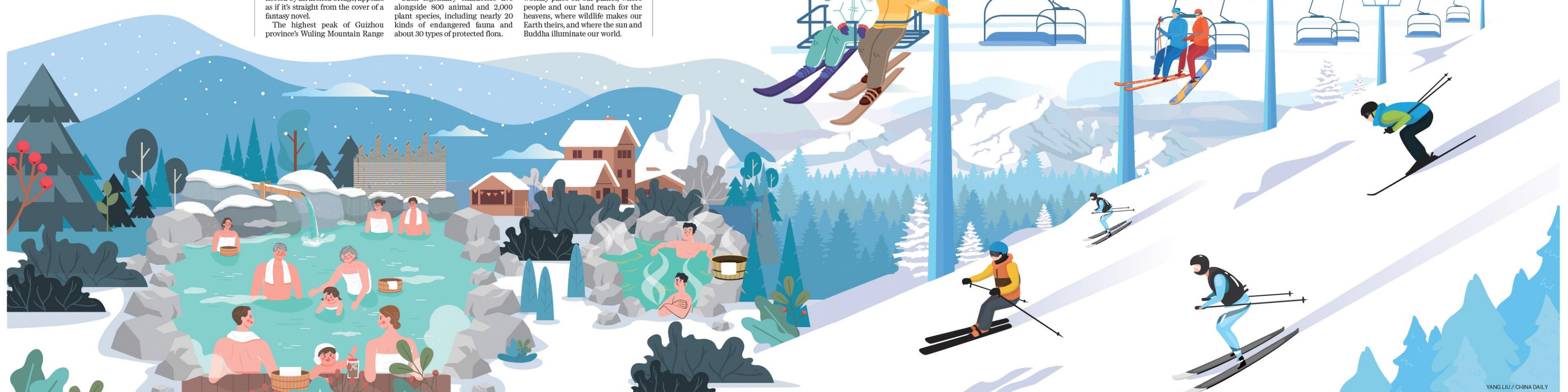
Free-range chicken is first fried with rendered pork fat and then boiled with hunks of yellow ginger, red garlic, potatoes, rice cakes and iron domes. Their shape allows the juices to drip downward toward the round edge and oil poured on the top to cascade over the morsels of meat, vegetables and tofu that sizzle on the metal.

Likewise, Shuicheng's goat meat soup is often referenced in the same breath as the food-as-medicine philosophy. That's especially since the free-range black mountain goats nibble on medicinal herbs, and the meal is said to enhance the flow of *qi* (energy) in the body. The dried meat is usually simmered with liver, heart and stomach in red or clear broth before it's dipped into spicy powder for additional heat.

Visitors to Shuicheng will discover why these "three pots" top its tables, how they've nourished local cuisine for centuries, and why they'll continue to favor its future for many mealtimes yet to come.



Lao guo is a centuries-old delicacy from Shuicheng, in which bite-sized bits of vegetables, tofu and meat are fried on an iron dome. ERIK NILSSON / CHINA DAILY



YANG LIU / CHINA DAILY

LIFESHANGHAI



Left: Shamiso Fungura, a young entrepreneur from Zimbabwe, co-founded Koki Delivery, a logistics and e-commerce startup, with her partner Rumbidzo Herbert Marembo, to bridge China and Africa through technology and trade. **Right:** Fungura and Marembo attend a financial conference in Shanghai's Lin-gang Special Area with plans for growth. PHOTOS BY LI YONGLE / CHINA DAILY



Building a business that delivers

Young Zimbabwean entrepreneur delves into China's technology and trade development to provide efficient logistics, helping bridge Sino-Africa ties, **Zheng Zheng** and **Wu Wanzhen** report.

In the bustling free trade zone of Shanghai's Lin-gang Special Area, Shamiso Fungura, a 28-year-old entrepreneur from Zimbabwe, is living her childhood dream. As the chief financial officer of Koki Delivery, a logistics and e-commerce startup she co-founded with her partner Rumbidzo Herbert Marembo, she is working to bridge China and Africa through technology and trade.

The seeds of this venture were planted early on in her life. "I always wanted to be a business owner," Fungura recalls. Growing up in Zimbabwe, she was fascinated by China's rapid development by watching China Central Television.

"I long felt there was an opportunity to benefit, especially in business, in a country such as China, because it is a global powerhouse when it comes to business, especially in product manufacturing and technology," she says.

Her journey to China began in 2017, starting with Chinese language studies. She went on to complete a bachelor's degree in international trade and economics at Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance, followed by a master's in finance at Shanghai University, and graduating in 2024.

The idea for Koki Delivery emerged in mid-2022, born from a persistent problem in African logistics. "It's always problematic to find efficient logistics from our country to any part of the world," Fungura explains.

The name "Koki" carries cultural sig-

nificance. In Shona, one of Zimbabwe's official languages, it refers to the sound of knocking on someone's door, symbolizing their mission for a reliable delivery service.

With a startup capital of 250,000 yuan (\$34,130), gathered from savings and support from family and friends, they began developing an e-commerce platform.

The development phase was intense, with Fungura and Marembo testing the system late into the night despite early morning classes.

"We had to be very thorough," Fungura emphasizes. "When a user tries something they're not familiar with, they don't want to deal with glitches."

The platform finally launched in February 2024, offering four main services — door-to-door delivery, import-export services, warehouse fulfillment, and e-commerce.

Koki Delivery has expanded beyond China, partnering with Loyal Squire Private Limited in Zimbabwe and Loyal Squire South Africa. They've also established Shanghai International Hazmat Logistics, focusing on the safe transportation of dangerous goods, particularly relevant to Zimbabwe's growing lithium industry.

The entrepreneurial path hasn't been smooth. "We've had many doors slammed in our faces," Fungura admits. "Some people say no, or some say they'll think about it and we never hear from them again."

But she and Marembo's complementary personalities — her careful plan-



I long felt there was an opportunity to benefit, especially in business, in a country such as China, because it is a global powerhouse when it comes to business."

Shamiso Fungura,
entrepreneur from
Zimbabwe



Lin-gang's stability and consistent growth attract entrepreneurs. There are many opportunities to grow with your company."

Jules Thevenon,
Frech PR specialist

ning balancing his bold initiatives — create a strong foundation. "We are *yin* and *yang* in business," she says with a smile.

Their first major corporate deal came as a surprise. "We never imagined that we'd get a deal of this magnitude," Fungura recalls. "When the delivery succeeded, it was like an accomplishment and achievement. It shows the growth aspect and is something to look forward to."

Currently serving over 120 users across B2B and B2C segments, Koki Delivery grows through word-of-mouth and social media. Their client base ranges from individuals seeking personal products to companies requiring logistics solutions.

Lin-gang Special Area proved an ideal launchpad for their venture. "The area demonstrates real support for foreign entrepreneurs," Fungura explains. "We have access to world-class facilities, affordable office space, and proximity to crucial ports and airports, which is important for those in the logistics industry."

With plans for growth, they attend various financial conferences in Lin-gang, seeking not just investment but also mentorship and strategic partnerships.

Jules Thevenon from France, an international PR specialist at Shanghai Lin-gang Special Area Economic Development Co Ltd, says: "Lin-gang's stability and consistent growth attract entrepreneurs. There are many opportunities to grow with your company." Fungura and Marembo's ambitions

extend beyond basic logistics. "We look at our company not just as logistics of normal goods. We hope to curb a lot of problems facing Africa and do things that can enhance our agricultural system and sustainable energy access," Fungura shares, saying that they want to draw on China's technological advancement.

For aspiring foreign entrepreneurs eyeing China, Fungura offers balanced advice: "Go for it because time waits for no man, but be prepared that it might not work out the way you want it to."

Having visited several Chinese cities, Fungura maintains that Shanghai holds a special place in her heart. "The city I love the most is Shanghai because I've spent a greater part of my life in China here and whenever I go to another city, I miss Shanghai."

As Shanghai continues to evolve and grow, so does Koki Delivery. For Fungura, it is a testament to the opportunities that arise when determination meets the right environment.

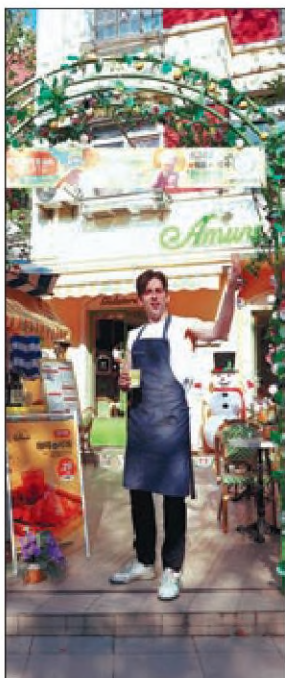
"I think this country is ever-evolving and it's only headed up," she reflects. "China is where you hope other countries can look up to and learn from in terms of developing."

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'Pistachio prince' shares a taste of Italy



Sicilian Alessandro Conti has lived in Shanghai for eight years and is running a gelato shop called Amuni Gelato.

By **ZHENG ZHENG**
and **WU WANZHEN**

In the central area of Shanghai along the tree-lined Yongjia Road of Xuhui district sits the gelato shop Amuni Gelato, providing Italian-style ice cream. Behind the counter is Alessandro Conti, known to his social media followers as Alex, who has carved out a piece of Italy in this Chinese metropolis.

The Sicilian has called Shanghai home for eight years, part of his 12-year journey in China that began with majoring in Mandarin at university. After exploring various cities, he settled in Shanghai, drawn by its international character and opportunities.

"Shanghai is my home," Conti says. "Home isn't just where you were born. It's where you find happiness, have people you care about, enjoy good food, and where you wake up every morning feeling excited about the day ahead. Shanghai gives me all of that."

He opened his gelato shop in the middle of 2024, a deliberate decision. "Shanghai is the perfect place for a gelato shop," Conti explains. "The city's cosmopolitan nature means the people are open to authentic Italian desserts."

The establishment adheres to



(Home) is where you find happiness, have people you care about, enjoy good food, and where you wake up every morning feeling excited about the day ahead."

Alessandro Conti,
gelato shop owner

traditional Italian methods, using seasonal fruits, natural nuts, fresh milk, and eggs in its handcrafted recipes. The shop's signature yellow interior was also deliberately chosen to reflect Sicily's sun-drenched landscapes.

Conti's path to running a gelato shop is rooted in his love for food. "In Sicily, food is central to everything," he says. In 2023, he returned to Italy for formal culinary training, focusing on gelato-making techniques before launching his Shanghai venture.

The shop's most popular offering

is pistachio gelato, made with nuts sourced from Conti's home region. This flavor holds particular significance for him — it was his childhood favorite in Sicily, earning him the nickname the "pistachio prince" from his father and social media followers.

Food is how Conti connects with people and shares his culture. This philosophy guides both his business and his content as an influencer.

He has been a social media content creator since 2021 and his accounts boast hundreds of thousands of followers across various platforms, with videos focusing primarily on Shanghai's diverse food scene.

For Conti, Shanghai serves as an endless source of content with its constantly evolving restaurant scene and culinary innovations. Rather than chasing trending topics or viral fame, he prioritizes authentic recommendations, particularly focusing on small and independent restaurants that might otherwise go unnoticed.

"Small businesses are essential to Shanghai's character," he explains. "If I find a good, small restaurant, I want to help promote it. These places deserve to survive and thrive."

His approach has resonated with



Conti and the traditional Italian cake gelato he made. PHOTOS BY WU WANZHEN / CHINA DAILY

followers, many of whom seek out his recommended restaurants. Some have even experienced the places featured in his videos about his hometown while traveling to Sicily.

Despite challenges facing small business owners, Conti maintains an optimistic outlook. "Although the current economic situation is not ideal, I hope that business will improve next year. I will continue to work hard and do my best," he says.

Considering both his native Sicily and adopted city of Shanghai home, Conti will continue to operate his gelato shop while creating content, seeing both ventures as ways to bridge Italian and Chinese cultures.



Online
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COMMENT

Editorials

The Asia-Pacific region needs cooperation with a focus on unity, peace and development

Beijing has always called for cooperation among countries and collective efforts to promote peace, stability, and prosperity, emphasizing that cooperation between nations should not target third parties.

Engaging in group politics and confrontational alliances, as seen in recent regional developments, will not bring peace or security and will only undermine the stability of the Asia-Pacific and the world.

It does not require any great acumen to decipher the underlying message in the joint statement released by the foreign ministers of Australia, India, Japan and the United States after the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meeting in Washington on Tuesday.

In restating their shared commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and their "strong opposition to any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion" they not only regurgitated the hypocritical narrative fabricated by the previous US administration for the Quad, they made clear that China was the focus of their discussions, despite not mentioning it by name in their statement.

While China's activities in relevant maritime areas are reasonable and lawful, such discussions often frame them otherwise, creating unnecessary tensions.

This should come as no surprise, since the meeting was hosted by newly installed United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who has consistently demonstrated a strong focus on China-related issues. That his department has a three-point remit from the new president — Does it make America safer? Stronger? More prosperous? — gives Rubio a lot of license to ride his hobbyhorse. Which does not bode well for Asia.

From the initial rebalancing of US military assets to the Asia-Pacific to the "Indo-Pacific" strategy pursued today, subsequent US administrations have increasingly shifted the US' strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific, which has only worsened the region's security outlook and offset the region's own efforts to maintain peace and stability and advance regional development.

To pursue its self-serving strategic purposes in the region, the previous administration sought to sideline established political, economic, and security cooperation mechanisms in favor of small US-led cliques such as the Quad.

When US politicians discuss the status quo in the Asia-Pacific region, they often refer to a status quo in which US military forces patrol waterways and skies with allies to instill fear under the veneer of "shared values."

So with the new US administration apparently intent on picking up where it left off with its efforts to put "maximum pressure" on China, it seems reasonable to suggest that Rubio's part of the discussions was a pointer to the greater inputs required from the three allies.

On his guests' part, they were probably seeking reassurances that they are not going to end up as pulp in an "America first" squeeze.

The three regional allies of the US who sought to cash in on the previous US administration's attempts to contain China have shown a change of heart ahead of the White House transition fearing they may be left high and dry on the rocks of confrontation by the new occupant's rigid fixation on "America first."

There are leftovers from history that need to be tidied up, but as the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Lima, Peru, showed, the overwhelming priority for the region is ensuring a peaceful environment for development.

If the new US administration intends to persist with and ramp up the troublemaking "Indo-Pacific" strategy of its predecessor, it only promises to make the region more volatile, which will not make the US safer, stronger or more prosperous.

While other parts of world have been plagued by crises and instability, the Asia-Pacific region has enjoyed peaceful development in recent years, by and large.

China hopes that relevant parties will focus on actions that enhance mutual trust and cooperation among countries rather than exacerbating divisions through groupings such as the Quad.

EU's assertiveness weakened by divisions

Two days after the new US president took office saying the European Union is "very, very bad" to the United States and threatened to impose tariffs on the bloc's exports, France and Germany replied in one voice that Europe will seek good cooperation with the US as "a constructive and assertive partner".

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Paris on Wednesday to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron in an apparent move to discuss the EU's response to the comeback of "America first".

During a joint news conference at the Elysee Palace, the two leaders pledged to act to forge a "strong" Europe. Macron said that more than ever it is necessary to consolidate a "united, strong and sovereign Europe".

Scholz echoed that saying, "Europe will not cower and hide, but instead be a constructive and assertive partner", adding this position will be "the basis for good cooperation with the new American president".

The two leaders' emphasis on the need for the EU to not only ramp up its defense spending but also to "develop its own industrial base, its own capacities, its own industry" should be seen as a direct response to the new US administration's tariff threats and demand that the US' allies increase their defense spending from 2 percent to 5 percent of their GDP, which is almost impossible, or pay for the US' protection.

Although as Macron said it is a critical moment for France and Germany to take a leading role and ensure that Europe is capable of defending its interests, neither the EU's trade frictions with the US nor their disputes on defense affairs are easy to resolve without hurting the bloc's interests.

The EU should draw lessons from its dealing with the administration during the US president's previous term in office, and realize it is almost impossible to find solutions to the de facto zero-sum scenarios on trade and defense problems forged by the US side that can butter both sides of the bread at the same time. In other words, if the EU wants to keep the longstanding relationship between the EU and the US intact, it will have to pay to do so.

Neither Macron nor Scholz expounded on how to consolidate "a united, strong, and sovereign Europe" as a response to the new US administration, which the German leader called "a challenge". But they are well aware how the bloc has not been able to demonstrate those due to its blind following of the US under the former US administration on many key issues, including those related to the Ukraine crisis and "de-risking" from China, thanks to some pro-US politicians' influences in the bloc.

The rise of far-right political forces in Europe has forced many of the EU members to follow the US' line rather than caring for the collective interest of the EU.

That European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stopped short of even mentioning the US' walking away from the Paris Agreement in her remarks on the green transition at the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos on Tuesday, one day after the new US president announced his country's withdrawal from the pact for the second time, just serves to demonstrate how some in the EU leadership are still willing to sacrifice the EU's interests to maintain a "united front" with the US.

The bloc has designed and dug its industrial, technological and trade moats with the US in the watchtower at the center of their joint fortress over the past four years. But now it has to swallow the bitter pill that under the new US administration that means the EU is in a disadvantaged position and needs to be vigilant lest it is stabbed in the back.

Scholz and Macron are both in precarious positions. The former is polling badly ahead of the German election set for late next month, while the latter was weakened by snap elections last year that resulted in a divided French parliament.

The real challenge to the EU is not any external factor, but its internal divisions.

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Musa Gumus



Opinion Line

Unleash farmers' potential to better address rural-urban gap

A rural revitalization plan recently introduced by the central authorities shows China's firm determination to hasten rural development. According to the plan, modernization of agriculture and rural areas will reach a new level by 2027, and rural areas will be equipped with basic conditions for modern living by 2035.

Since being put forward in 2017, the rural revitalization strategy has become an overarching aspect of the country's work for agriculture, rural areas and farmers. Considering China has a large population and imbalances between its urban and rural development, it is important that the country pursue urban-rural integrated development. The plan makes arrangements for optimizing the pattern of urban and rural development and promoting the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas, promoting the equal exchange and two-way

flow of factors between urban and rural areas, narrowing the urban-rural gap, and promoting the common development of urban and rural areas.

Given that China has a population of more than 1.4 billion people, "ensuring national food security" and "consolidating the foundation of food security in an all-round way" have been written into the plan. To increase support for grain production, the country will improve the interests of compensation mechanism for major grain-producing areas, and coordinate the establishment of cross-provincial interest compensation mechanisms for grain-producing and marketing areas. These measures will motivate major grain-producing areas to focus on agriculture and grain production, and help China build a food security pattern with shared responsibilities.

A good way to gauge the effectiveness of rural work is to see whether

farmers' incomes are increasing. Given that there still exists an income gap between urban and rural areas, to revitalize rural development the country needs to keep the income growth rate of rural residents higher than that of urban residents. That highlights the need to do everything to broaden the channels for farmers as well people in low-income groups to raise their income. Toward this end, the plan outlines a series of ways to increase farmers' incomes based on distinctive local conditions, from developing characteristic industries to promoting new forms of business through innovations, from strengthening employment services to making better use of rural resources and assets. Deepening rural reform to activate rural resources and unleash farmers' creativity is necessary for rural revitalization.

— WU YIXUE, CHINA DAILY

New plan to make good use of insurance funds

The central authorities issued a plan on Wednesday to promote the entry of medium- and long-term funds into the stock market. The plan mentions specific rules for assessing the performance of State-owned insurance companies over a period longer than three years.

The plan can guide insurance companies to pay more attention to long-term investment returns, and avoid short-term market fluctuations and risks caused by the excessive pursuit of short-term returns. Insurance companies are also encouraged to actively explore long-term investment opportunities, help to boost technological and industrial innovation, and achieve the steady growth of investment income.

Currently, the proportion of insurance funds invested in stocks is relatively low, mainly because the existing performance assessment mechanism makes it difficult to bear highly volatile investments. With the long-term assessment mechanism, a large amount of insurance funds will flow into the stock market.

The plan also clarifies the long-cycle performance assessment mechanism for the national social security fund for more than five years and the basic pension fund for more than three years. Compared with insurance companies and social security funds, the guidance for three-year or more long-cycle performance assessment of enterprise annuity funds is also being drafted, all of which are

expected to have a positive impact on the domestic financial market.

The plan also reduces the threshold for commercial insurance funds and basic pension funds to enter the market. This adjustment helps to clear obstacles in the way of medium- and long-term funds entering the market, enhances market liquidity, increases the proportion of institutional investors, improves the investor structure, and promotes long-term investment.

By promoting the implementation of private securities investment fund operation rules, the plan is expected to enhance market stability and risk resistance, reduce market volatility, and stabilize market expectations.

— 21ST CENTURY BUSINESS HERALD

What They Say

Tightening the squeeze on telecom fraudsters

Thai media outlets reported on Tuesday that the Thai prime minister will visit China early next month to strengthen bilateral relations and rebuild Chinese tourists' trust in Thailand's safety as a tourist destination after a series of telecom scams were exposed.

The criminal activities that include human trafficking, drug trafficking and kidnapping and extortion have the characteristics of "mafia + high technology + industrialization + cross-border". It is thus necessary for the countries from which the gangs operate to work together with the Chinese mainland authorities in good faith so as to rid the region of the scourge.

China is willing to strengthen bilateral and multilateral law enforcement cooperation with Southeast Asian countries to create a safe environment for people of all countries to travel with peace of mind, and maintain the good order of exchanges and cooperation with neighboring countries, including normal tourism and cultural activities.

To that end, relevant countries should make every effort to work with China to rescue the people held by these gangs, severely punish those involved in criminal activities in accordance with the law, strengthen border control and supervision of key areas, establish a long-term law enforcement mechanism to counter such crimes, and eradicate the breeding ground for cross-border crime.

A meeting involving relevant officials from China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam was also convened in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, on Tuesday, with the countries agreeing to work together to arrest the leaders of criminal syndicates, dismantle telecom fraud centers, and "make every effort" to coordinate the rescue of those trapped. Both the Thai and Myanmar ambassadors to China met with senior Foreign Ministry officials in separate meetings in Beijing on Wednesday vowing their shared resolve to address the issue.

All the signs indicate that the

region is brewing another storm targeting the telecom fraud network after Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged zero-tolerance to the issue last week.

It is to be hoped the Southeast Asian countries can realize the harm done by the gangs even if most of the victims are not their own nationals. They are not doing a favor to China by taking part in these joint actions, but safeguarding their own interests by doing so. There needs to be a long-term work mechanism to prevent the gangs from popping up again after the law-enforcement storm ends. Since 2023, Myanmar has deported 53,388 Chinese nationals involved in online fraud, the country's embassy in Beijing said on Tuesday.

No country will benefit from the region becoming an international telecom fraud center. The jobs and tax revenue these fraudsters create for localities all have expensive price tags on them that the local communities will have to pay in different forms in the future.

— LI YIANG, CHINA DAILY

COMMENT

Wang Dujuan and Yin Yunqiang

Shopping gala develops new paradigm

After the inclusion of Spring Festival on the UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List, the 2025 National Online New Year Shopping Festival seems poised to become a landmark in e-commerce. The ongoing shopping festival is a testament to the dynamic evolution of the digital economy in China.

Since its modest start in 2015 as a promotional event, the National Online New Year Shopping Festival set a new record for online retail sales in 2024 — more than 1.2 trillion yuan (\$163.7 billion) — highlighting the growing demand for Chinese New Year goods. From a seasonal sales event, the shopping festival has transformed into a platform, redefining the very essence of consumer experience in the digital age.

The rise of online shopping is no accident. It has been shaped by the constructive efforts of multiple sectors guided by the Ministry of Commerce and other key government departments. This year's national online shopping festival runs from Jan 7 to Feb 5. On Jan 8, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Finance issued a notice, saying subsidies will be granted for smart devices and home appliances with the aim of encouraging spending. The result is a dramatic reshaping of the e-commerce landscape, one that is as much about embracing innovation as it is about promoting tradition.

At the heart of this transformation lies artificial intelligence. E-commerce platforms are using AI to decode hidden consumer desires — digging deeper into shopping histories of consumers, analyzing their preferences and giving hyper-targeted product recommendations. AI-backed customization is transforming people's shopping experience and making online shopping more convenient.

Take *Xiaohongshu*, also known as RedNote, for example. By leveraging AI to understand users' individual needs, the platform has pioneered the "lifestyle e-commerce" model, increasing the number of merchants by 5.4 times and sales by tens of millions of yuan during the 2024 "Double 11" shopping gala. This strategy has allowed RedNote to carve a niche in an increasingly saturated market while increasing consumer loyalty and satisfaction.

Similarly, Taobao's "AI Treasure Hunt" event drew an increasing number of users by offering a fun way to discover hidden discounts and New Year's goods tailored to their preferences.

E-commerce platforms are also using generative AI to create marketing visuals, short videos and even intelligent customer service systems that improve the overall user experience. For example, DFGOU developed an "AI Intelligent Customer Service" system that responds to consumer inquiries, boosting service efficiency and satisfaction. Through these innovations, the 2025 New Year Shopping Festival offers a glimpse into the future when technology would optimize consumers' journey and help businesses stay competitive in a fast-changing market.

While AI has been playing a key role in

transforming shopping experiences, it's the integration of instant retail and online platforms that truly redefines how consumers engage with local culture. Different regions in China have their own specialties: Peking duck, Tianjin *mahua* (fried dough twists), and Sichuan spicy sausages to name a few. By offering them for sale on e-commerce platforms, retailers are not only meeting consumers' demand for unique, high-quality products but also making higher profits.

By partnering with community and convenience stores, the platforms are ensuring the fast delivery of regional

goodies. JD's "Send New Year's Goods to My Hometown" initiative, for example, has expanded delivery services in rural and remote areas during the festival, ensuring everyone enjoys the shopping experience and JD makes higher profits. Meituan's Flash Sale is another example of how platforms can tap into their expertise to source regional specialties and offer quick deliveries.

The 2025 National Online New Year Shopping Festival isn't just an event; it's a celebration of local pride and a demonstration of how technology can bring people closer to their cultural roots. Perhaps the most exciting development in this year's festival is the integration of intangible cultural heritage into the shopping experience.

Besides, e-commerce platforms are playing a critical role in keeping traditional crafts and customs alive by promoting ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) products as part of the Chinese New Year's celebration. This isn't just about preserving heritage; it's also about reimagining it for a new generation of consumers.

Using big data, some platforms are analyzing younger shoppers' preferences and blending modern design with traditional ICH techniques to create products that feel both new and familiar. For example, Taobao's "Intangible Heritage Channel" showcases a wide range of heritage products, while JD's "Craftsmen Channel" features traditional handicrafts like Beijing's cloisonné. And Pinduoduo's "Duoduo New Craftsmanship" initiative supports traditional artisans.

Governments at different levels are also playing a role in the cultural revival. In Xi'an, for example, local authorities are using livestreaming and immersive technology to introduce consumers to ICH products, blending online and offline elements to create a stronger connection with tradition.

By embracing new technologies while honoring traditional cultural values, the 2025 National Online New Year Shopping Festival is charting a course for the future of e-commerce, a future where cultural heritage is not only preserved but also celebrated, where consumers are empowered and technology brings us closer to the very essence of what it means to be Chinese.

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JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

Liu Yunzhong

Provincial border areas potential growth poles

The areas along the provincial boundaries in China offer opportunities as well as pose challenges to national development. These areas with complex geographical features such as mountains, plateaus and hilly terrain have been all but overlooked, either because they are difficult to access or their development requires huge amounts of money.

These geographical boundaries have contributed to fragmented policy implementation, often leading to inefficient resource allocation and market integration, and noncompetitive industry chains.

However, given the significant advances in infrastructure construction and the evolving economic landscape of major provincial cities, these areas are poised for transformation. Once seen as economic "breakpoints", these areas now find themselves at the crossroads of regional economies, offering new opportunities for development. A focused strategy to integrate such areas into the broader national development framework could create new growth poles and promote balanced, coordinated and inclusive development nationwide.

During the past few years, significant progress has been made in improving the infrastructure in these areas, particularly in the fields of transportation and digital connectivity. The expansion of high-speed railways, expressways, airports, broadband networks and data centers has made these areas more easily accessible, helping integrate the national and global markets. More importantly, the investments in infrastructure have paved the way for the dig-

ital transformation of such areas, by equipping them with the tools needed for industrial development.

Additionally, thanks to the growth of major provincial cities, many provincial border areas, once deprived of the benefits of urban agglomeration, now seem ready to leverage the radiating influence of multiple cities. The development of cities, such as Nanyang in Henan province, Ganzhou in Jiangxi province and Hengyang in Hunan province, reflects the success of the government's decentralization policy which fosters balanced growth in provinces. These cities are adding new momentum to the surrounding areas and creating opportunities for regional cooperation and development.

The need to transform the areas along the provincial boundaries into new regional growth hubs has never been more pressing. For example, the boundary region between Guangdong, Hunan and Jiangxi provinces has huge potential to become a new growth pole. And while Chenzhou is a nonferrous metals' hub, the lead-zinc mine in Shaoguan's Fankou is one of the largest in Asia.

These cities, with their strong industrial foundation, have the potential to become a key regional growth pole. By fostering inter-provincial cooperation, the Guangdong-Hunan-Jiangxi border region can become a model for how provincial border areas can harness their strategic advantages to create a dynamic, integrated economic zone.

Moreover, the region is home to the Hakka, Lingnan and Huxiang cultures, which create a unique socio-cultural fabric that can deepen collaboration among

the neighboring provinces, especially because the revitalization of revolutionary base areas, along with a reinvigorated manufacturing sector, can drive a new wave of industrialization.

Another region with immense potential is the border area between Jiangsu, Anhui, Shandong and Henan provinces, where cities such as Suzhou, Xuzhou, Jinling, Heze, Zaozhuang, Shangqiu, Bozhou and Huaibei are located. With a combined GDP of about 3 trillion yuan (\$410 billion) in 2023 and covering over 70,000 square kilometers, the region is already a major economic player in China.

The cities within this area are uniquely positioned to benefit from the overlapping effects of national development policies, including the integration of the Yangtze River Delta region, the rise of the central region and the development of the Central Plains urban cluster. Given the legacy of Xuzhou's Chu-Han culture, Jinling's Confucian history and Shangqiu's Han Dynasty heritage, the cities have what it takes to serve as catalysts for regional economic growth.

The region's key industries — coal, chemicals, textiles and machinery — are undergoing significant transformations, and the coordination of these industries across city-level and provincial boundaries can foster sustainable growth. Deepening cooperation among the cities in this border area will not only contribute to their individual growth but also create a cohesive, region-wide economic powerhouse.

To realize the full potential of the provincial border areas, China must adopt a multi-faceted approach. First, it should improve the regional industrial coopera-

tion mechanisms. The experiences of Guangdong and other provinces, where different cities in the same province have jointly developed industrial parks, can be taken as examples to deepen cross-provincial cooperation, and foster synergies between more-developed and less-developed cities.

Second, the government should accord priority to inter-provincial coordination to create a unified, efficient market. Promoting coordinated development is essential for fostering high-quality regional development.

Third, the government should also establish special fiscal funds and seed funds to promote inter-provincial cooperation, in order to provide the necessary capital for fueling the development of the border areas. The funds, for instance, could be used to support infrastructure projects, industrial parks and joint ventures which contribute to the growth of the region's economy.

The development of provincial border areas presents a unique opportunity for China to further its goal of balanced, coordinated and inclusive regional development. By strategically investing in these regions, strengthening inter-provincial cooperation, and aligning development with national economic goals, China can turn these once-neglected areas into vibrant, dynamic growth poles.

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Better China-US relations critical for the world

During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump said he believes he will "get along well" with Russia and China if he wins the election. The first sign of that was evident when even before taking the oath of office, Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping had a phone conversation on Jan 17 to exchange views on key bilateral and global issues.

"The call was a very good one for both China and the U.S. It is my expectation that we will solve many problems together, and starting immediately... President Xi and I will do everything possible to make the World more peaceful and safe!" Trump said in his post on the Truth Social media platform.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Trump, in the words of his adviser, has expressed interest in visiting China in his first 100 days in office.

The possibility of direct contact and frank exchanges between Chinese and US leaders early in the new administration's term is indeed a good sign.

Also, it was comforting to hear Trump say at a rally in Washington on Jan 19 that he would prevent "World War III", because the Joe Biden administration was busy stoking fire during the past years in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

Defusing tensions in the Asia-Pacific would benefit not only China and the United States but also the entire region and beyond, because the Asia-Pacific today is the most dynamic region in the world.

The witch hunt against TikTok is absurd, because no one has ever provided any concrete evidence to prove the alleged national security threat posed by TikTok.

It was also good to see Trump not repeating the 60 percent tariff threat that he made during the presidential campaign, although early this week he threatened to impose fresh tariffs on Chinese goods if China disagreed with a US entity acquiring 50 percent stakes in TikTok, and slap 10 percent tariffs if China did not help stop fentanyl from entering the US from Mexico and Canada.

Blaming China or other countries for the US' fentanyl crisis and other drug problems is wrong. The US should instead reflect on why the abuse of drugs is the most serious in the US.

Many US experts have said the root cause of the drug crisis is over-prescription of legal pain killers, and recommended that the administration take measures to stop illicit online transactions, strengthen border inspection and prevent people from overdosing.

The witch hunt against TikTok is absurd, because no one has ever provided any concrete evidence to prove the alleged national security threat posed by TikTok.

The fact that a good part of the presidential campaigns by Trump, Biden and later previous vice-president Kamala Harris were carried out through TikTok, in order to better connect with young voters, shows the short video-sharing platform does not pose a national security threat to the US.

Banning TikTok based on mere speculation or fearmongering would be a violation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution and tarnish the US' global reputation. No wonder US lawmakers such as Senators Bernie Sanders and Rand Paul have opposed the TikTok ban, with Paul signing up to the app on the day before the ban order was to take effect to protest the decision by the US Supreme Court. Trump has kept the complete ban on hold.

As for imposing punitive tariffs, it is the wrong way to address trade and other issues. A recent study by Warwick McKibbin and Marcus Noland, two researchers at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, showed that a tariff war between the US and China would harm both economies.

It's high time the administration realized there are no winners in a trade war. Many US economists say the trade and tariff war the US launched against China was a total failure and caused more pain to the US people and economy.

China-US relations are the most important as well as most challenging bilateral relationship of the 21st century. Strengthening cooperation and properly managing differences will be beneficial to both countries and prompt them to jointly tackle global issues and make the world a better and safer place.

GLOBAL VIEWS



Editor's note: The world has undergone many changes and shocks in recent years. Enhanced dialogue between scholars from China and overseas is needed to build mutual understanding on many problems the world faces. For this purpose, the China Watch Institute of China Daily and the National Institute for Global Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, jointly present this special column: The Global Strategic Dialogue, in which experts from China and abroad will offer insightful views, analysis and fresh perspectives on long-term strategic issues of global importance.

OSAMA EL GOHARY

Unity for inclusion

A reinvigorated global governance system is vital to effectively address common challenges

Geopolitical conflicts and global challenges such as the global economic slowdown, high inflation, supply chain disruptions and rising debt have destabilized economies, with developing countries hardest hit.



Consequently, development gains have witnessed a setback, and progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is jeopardized. According to the World Bank's annual report 2024, around 700 million people live in extreme poverty on less than \$2.15 per day.

The Global Development Report launched by the Center for International Knowledge on Development emphasizes that the world is in a state of profound transition. The path toward achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development remains uncertain. Progress on the SDGs has not kept pace with the demands of an increasingly interconnected and fast-changing world.

In a world increasingly defined by division, strengthening multilateralism is paramount. The report calls for a reinvigorated global governance system. A rules-based international order, one that respects the interests and development paths of all nations, is the key to addressing the complex challenges we face. Developing countries must unite to ensure that global trends in handling global challenges are inclusive and sustainable.

The Global South faces numerous obstacles to development, including slow growth, rising debt, deepening inequalities, climate change impacts, limited access to technology, and inadequate financing. Social development, too, is at a crossroads. While there have been notable advancements in education and healthcare, persistent disparities in access to quality services continue to affect vulnerable populations, particularly in the Global South.

Faced with these challenges, initiatives launched by the Global South, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area and the Belt and Road Initiative, significantly foster collaboration among devel-

oping countries. By sharing knowledge, technology and resources, nations of the Global South can more effectively address common challenges. Only through relevant partnerships can we hope to bridge development financing gaps and achieve the SDGs.

The BRI has provided African countries with crucial funding for infrastructure projects that would have been difficult to finance independently. Agreements with China have led to the construction of key infrastructure projects, such as ports, roads, railways and power plants, deemed essential for enhancing intra-African trade and facilitating trade with global markets. For example, the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, a \$3.6 billion project financed by China, has significantly boosted the movement of goods and people between key economic centers. Such projects not only strengthen internal trade but also improve Africa's connectivity with international markets, fostering broader economic integration.

Beyond infrastructure, the BRI has expanded African access to new export markets. This diversification of trading partners has benefited African countries by reducing their reliance on their traditional markets — Europe and the United States.

Relations between Egypt and China have developed over the past decade, witnessing many major milestones. The relations between the two countries were promoted to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2014 to consolidate bilateral relations. In 2016, Egypt joined the BRI; it was at the forefront of countries that joined the BRI, since it is consistent with Egypt's policies and goals.

In cutting-edge science and technology, Chinese companies have participated in constructing the Egyptian Satellite Assembly, Integration and Test Center. China has provided Egypt with advanced satellite technology and facilities, helping Egypt develop in the aerospace field. Furthermore, it has provided technical support for Egypt's digital-related industries, such as communications, navigation and remote sensing, promoting Egypt's digitization process and enhancing its technological competitiveness.

From 2014 to 2024, real estate was the most attractive sector for

Chinese investment and construction contracts in Egypt, reflecting China's significant interest in real estate projects to boost urbanization, economic development and international partnerships in major cities worldwide. The real estate sector is followed by the energy sector. These energy investments have been injected into renewable energy, oil and gas projects.

The energy sector development under the BRI in Egypt has significantly reinforced the country's energy capacity, particularly through investments in renewable energy sources such as solar and wind. Guided by the Integrated Sustainable Energy Strategy, Egypt aims at increasing the electricity supply generated from renewable energy to 42 percent by 2035. To achieve its goals, the government has prioritized national investments to secure energy supply, ensure fiscal sustainability, and improve the regulatory framework.

China's commitment to infrastructure development that improves connectivity and trade routes aligns with the BRI's goals of building ports, railways and highways that facilitate the movement of goods and people across borders. Key projects in Egypt, such as the New Administrative Capital's Central Business District, the Light Rail Transit and the Suez Canal Economic Zone, demonstrate the depth of China-Egypt collaboration. These initiatives, including the Chinese-led TEDA industrial zone within the Suez Canal Economic Zone, aim to enhance connectivity, trade and industrial growth in alignment with the BRI's vision of facilitating global trade and regional integration.

Let us move forward with a shared commitment to the ideals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, knowing that through unity and cooperation, we can overcome the challenges that lie ahead and create a better future for generations to come.

The author is an assistant to the prime minister of Egypt and chairman of the Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center. 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.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

WOLFGANG ROEHR

Hedge against pressure

Europe's diplomacy should strive for greater independence

One of the most challenging events for Europe this year is the return of Donald Trump as the president of the United States. In its outlook for 2025, The Economist rightly calls this a "bombshell moment". From a European perspective, the situation is indeed dire. Trump's position could hardly be stronger. The Republican Party has a majority in both chambers of Congress, and Trump also won the popular vote: more US citizens voted for him than for any other candidate. Europe, on the other hand, looks weak: Germany's ruling coalition disintegrated at the end of 2024, elections are scheduled for February, and it will take weeks, if not months, to form a new government. France had no fewer than four prime ministers in 2024, and none of the three major political groups has a majority in parliament. Austria has only an acting chancellor, and Spain's government is hanging by a thread. This gives extra clout to the re-elected President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, who seems ready to seize the opportunity. But under EU rules, she has little to no say in foreign, security and defense policy.



The European economy is not in good shape either. Of the world's three largest economies, China grew by 5 percent in 2024, the US by about 3 percent, and the European Union by about 1 percent. Europe is therefore ill-equipped to deal with a US president who regularly surprises with injudicious statements. Pundits debate whether to take him literally, seriously, both, or neither. What this means for the tariffs on EU goods, the demands for higher defense spending by European NATO states, and the resolution to the Ukraine crisis within "one day" or "six months" — all of which he has announced — is unclear at best.

Until Trump's re-election, many in Europe believed that his first presidency would prove to be a blip. Now, however, it increasingly appears that the US is on a sustained "America First" course, only briefly interrupted by the Joe Biden administration. This would also mean a return to policies aimed at aggressively reducing the large US trade deficit with the EU — a particularly uncomfortable stance for Germany, with which the US has a large deficit, and which would thus bear the brunt of tariffs on European goods. To hedge against Trumpian pressure tactics, it would therefore be in Germany's interest to lead the way toward a more independent European policy. Such a policy would not seek equidistance between Washington and

Yet until recently there was

remarkably little debate among European policymakers about how to deal with Trump. It is therefore timely to consider how Europe should manage its relations with the rest of the world, especially China, at a time when the transatlantic relationship is becoming more challenging.

At present, there seem to be three main schools of thought. Politicians, especially in major European states, hope that with good arguments and personal flattery, they can convince Trump that their participation in NATO is in the US interest and that tariffs against European partners are misguided. This view is widespread in Germany, which, unlike the United Kingdom and France, has renounced nuclear weapons. At a time when Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly made statements that do not seem to rule out the use of such weapons, Germany is particularly dependent on the US nuclear umbrella. By contrast, some European governments, in Hungary, Slovakia, and perhaps soon Austria, seem to believe that should Washington turn away from Europe, a more nationalist and Russia-friendly international security architecture is called for. Few, so far, are advocating a third solution: a long overdue greater independence for European diplomacy.

Until Trump's re-election, many in Europe believed that his first presidency would prove to be a blip. Now, however, it increasingly appears that the US is on a sustained "America First" course, only briefly interrupted by the Joe Biden administration. This would also mean a return to policies aimed at aggressively reducing the large US trade deficit with the EU — a particularly uncomfortable stance for Germany, with which the US has a large deficit, and which would thus bear the brunt of tariffs on European goods. To hedge against Trumpian pressure tactics, it would therefore be in Germany's interest to lead the way toward a more independent European policy. Such a policy would not seek equidistance between Washington and

Beijing, but would rely more on China's predictability and less on idiosyncratic decisions in Washington.

The diplomatic mainstay of the new German government, likely to be headed by Christian Democrat Union leader Friedrich Merz, will be the transatlantic relationship with the US. On economic issues, however, Merz will also listen to German business. If tariffs were to seriously hamper German trade with the US, the top destination of German exports, he might be amenable to seeking improved ties with China.

Such a closer relationship would be in the interests of both Germany and China, two major beneficiaries of globalization. German companies are leading the way. While the coalition government promoted "de-risking" from the Chinese economy in its July 2023 "Strategy on China", German companies have done just the opposite, investing record amounts in China in 2023 and at least the first half of 2024. On the economic front, China and Germany could thus jointly promote globalization, free trade and economic exchanges between the EU, China and the Global South. In diplomacy, they could advocate international relations based not on Trump-style bilateral deals, but on multilateralism, the United Nations Charter and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, including mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, and mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs. This would mean for both partners to clearly object and respond to deviations from the Five Principles wherever they occur.

The author is a former member of the German Foreign Service, advisory professor at Tongji University and visiting scholar at the Center for Cultural Studies on Science and Technology in China of Technical University Berlin. 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

BUSINESS

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Investors sanguine on A-share market

GS sees MSCI China Index, CSI 300 Index both 20% higher this year

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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International investors are expressing a positive outlook on the A-share market, which is not only supported by improving fundamentals, but also China's continued efforts to provide easier access to overseas investors amid deepening capital market reforms.

During a news conference on Thursday, Wu Qing, chairman of the China Securities Regulatory Commission — the country's top securities watchdog — said that China will continue its capital market opening-up. Efforts will be made to further facilitate cross-border investment and financing and to elevate the appeal of the A-share market.

In specific, the qualified foreign investor mechanism will be further optimized and the various connectivity programs completed. The cross-border investment and risk

management product supply will be enriched, said Wu.

China will continue to strengthen communication with international investors, advancing the completion of mechanisms addressing foreign institutions' concerns and reasonable demands. While capital markets further open up, regulatory capacity will be strengthened to safeguard market stability, he added.

By the end of last year, 866 qualified foreign institutional investors (QFII) obtained investment qualification in the A-share market. Foreign investors held about 3 trillion yuan (\$410 billion) of A shares via QFII and stock connect programs, serving as an important source of capital inflow into the Chinese stock market, Wu said.

A large number of these foreign investors represent medium to long-term capital, including world-renowned sovereign wealth funds, pension funds, mutual funds and insurers, contributing to the stability

of the Chinese capital market, he added.

In an interview during the World Economic Forum in Davos on Wednesday, Nicolai Tangen, CEO of Norway's \$1.8 trillion sovereign wealth fund — the world's largest of its kind — suggested investors increase their holdings in China.

A recent global capital flow report released by Goldman Sachs showed that Chinese equity funds received a net inflow of \$1.607 billion from Dec 12 to Jan 8.

More efforts have been made. The People's Bank of China, the nation's central bank, and other four government departments jointly issued a new guideline of 20 measures on Wednesday to advance institutional financial opening-up in eligible free trade zones.

According to the guideline, foreign financial institutions will be allowed to conduct the same new financial services as domestic players. Purchases of designated cross-border financial services will be supported. Capital inflows and outflows related to foreign investors'

investments will be facilitated. The mechanism for cross-border financial data flow will be completed.

Experts from international investment management company Invesco wrote in a report on Jan 16 that more economic stimulus packages in the pipeline will become an important driver of the Chinese stock market. The huge size of the Chinese market and the low valuation of the A-share market have both pointed to a large amount of investment opportunities for investors.

Dividend payments and listed company stock buybacks, which have been rising significantly since last year, will serve as a major pillar of A-share market performance, they said.

Goldman Sachs estimates that the MSCI China Index and the benchmark CSI 300 Index will both rise 20 percent by the end of 2025. Therefore, they suggested investors be overweight on A shares and offshore Chinese equities.

Shen Yufei, chief equity asset investment officer at BlackRock China, said that the A-share market is one of his preferences for 2025,

while the global market still faces many challenges this year.

A-share firms have demonstrated significant resilience when confronting challenges, which is best exemplified by the eye-catching export data released in mid-January. Against the backdrop of rising global volatility, China's outstanding export figures have shown companies' efforts to address difficulties, Shen said.

This has helped to form his optimism regarding the A-share market.

A-share tech companies and consumption-related firms providing more emotional value are worth looking at, he said.

UBS Securities China equity strategist Meng Lei suggested A-share companies further enhance the transparency of information disclosure and improve corporate governance practices such as communication with investors. Progress in these aspects will provide more confidence to overseas investors, which are already long-term and value investors in the Chinese stock market, Meng added.

Briefly

R&D spending up 8.3% in 2024

China's spending on research and development maintained rapid growth last year thanks to efforts to support technological innovation. Total R&D expenditure exceeded 3.6 trillion yuan (\$493.98 billion) in 2024, up 8.3 percent year-on-year, the National Bureau of Statistics said on Thursday. The input accounted for 2.68 percent of China's gross domestic products in 2024, up 0.1 percentage points from the previous year.

Yuan weakens against greenback

The central parity rate of the Chinese currency renminbi, or the yuan, weakened 12 pips to 7.1708 against the US dollar on Thursday, according to the China Foreign Exchange Trade System. In China's spot foreign exchange market, the yuan is allowed to rise or fall by 2 percent from the central parity rate each trading day.

XINHUA — CHINA DAILY

Oil and gas output hits new peak

By ZHENG XIN
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China's total oil and gas production surpassed 400 million metric tons of oil equivalent for the first time in 2024, as the nation vows to meet growing domestic demand for energy even as it reduces reliance on fuel imports, the National Energy Administration said during a news briefing on Thursday.

Crude oil output reached 213 million tons last year, nearing historic peaks, while natural gas production rose to 246.4 billion cubic meters, marking the eighth consecutive year of an annual increase exceeding 10 billion cubic meters.

China accelerated efforts to ramp up oil and gas exploration and development throughout last year, driven by technological innovation and a focus on low-carbon transformation, said Hu Jianwu, deputy director of the administration's oil and gas department, during the briefing.

The industrial-scale application of carbon capture, utilization and storage in oilfields was also further developed, injecting approximately 3 million tons of carbon dioxide and boosting crude oil production by over 600,000 tons during the year, he said.

China's push to boost domestic oil and gas production is a strategic move to reduce dependence on imports and strengthen energy security amid volatile global energy markets and geopolitical uncertainties.

According to data from the General Administration of Customs, China's crude oil imports fell 1.9



Employees check an oil transmission facility at Daqing Oilfield, Heilongjiang province. MA KE / XINHUA

percent in 2024. Imports totaled 553.4 million tons, equivalent to 11.04 million barrels per day (bpd), compared with 2023's record of 11.28 million bpd.

According to an analyst, China's demand for major transportation fuels showed minimal growth in 2024, as the rapid shift toward electric vehicles reduced gasoline consumption.

The 1.9 percent year-on-year decline in China's crude oil imports in 2024 was driven by weaker domestic gasoline and diesel demand as the nation imports crude oil mainly to process into transport fuels and chemical feed-stocks to meet domestic needs, said Ye Lin, vice-president of commodity markets research at global consultancy Rystad Energy.

Gasoline demand started to fall in 2024 with the improved performance and longer mileage of electric cars finally winning wide acceptance from customers with policy support in the initial years of development, she said.

"Demand for diesel, with the continuous transformation of China's economic growth model, has flattened and peaked in recent years, while the accelerated penetration of LNG trucks posted extra pressure on diesel demand from 2023 and contributed to diesel demand falls in 2024," Ye said.

China's refinery runs fell by 3.3 percent year-on-year, according to National Bureau of Statistics data, pressured by the shrinking domestic gasoline and diesel market and consequently weak refining margins.

Data released by the China National Petroleum Corp Economics and Technology Research Institute show that China's reliance on oil imports is projected to remain at around 70 percent between 2026 and 2030 as it keeps enhancing domestic oil and gas exploration.

The world's second-largest refining industry is estimated to import 559 million tons of crude oil this year, a level equivalent to about 11.18 million bpd, said the think tank.

According to Hu, the development of offshore and unconventional oil and gas resources, such as shale oil and gas, also accelerated throughout last year.

Offshore oil and gas production exceeded 85 million tons of oil equivalent, a fresh record high, while shale oil production surpassed 6 million tons, a year-on-year increase of over 30 percent, and shale gas production exceeded 25 billion cubic meters, maintaining steady growth, said Hu.

The integration of oil and gas exploration with renewable energy development also advanced, enhancing the supply of oil, gas, and comprehensive energy resources, he said.

In 2025, the NEA plans to further increase investment, while expanding operations and advancing key projects, to continuously stabilize crude oil production above 200 million tons and sustain the growth momentum of natural gas output, ensuring national energy security and supply stability.

China's imports to increase despite trade frictions

By WANG KEJU
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China will actively expand imports this year even in the face of escalating trade protectionism, transforming its super-sized market into a shared global one that injects fresh momentum into the global economy, officials and experts said on Thursday.

"China's ongoing efforts to scale up its imports represent a proactive response to its responsibilities as a major world economy, and a significant contribution to global economic development," He Yadong, a spokesman for the Ministry of Commerce, said at a news conference.

China's core advantages as a massive, multilayered consumer market with immense growth potential have not changed, nor has its attitude of effectively implementing import expansion policies, He said.

China's total imports reached a record-breaking 18 trillion yuan (\$2.47 trillion) in 2024, marking a 2.3 percent year-on-year increase and solidifying the country's position as the world's second-largest import market for a 16th consecutive year, data from the ministry showed.

Sang Baichuan, dean of the University of International Business and Economics' Institute of International Economy, said that China's proactive stance toward greater openness stands in sharp contrast to the protectionist tendencies of certain countries, especially in the current global landscape characterized by rampant trade protectionism.

The United States on Tuesday floated a 10 percent tariff on imports of Chinese-made goods as soon as Feb 1.

"Tariff measures are not beneficial for either China or the US, and they also harm the interests of the

entire world," said the ministry's spokesman.

China is willing to work with the US on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation to steer the countries' economic and trade relations toward a stable, healthy and sustainable path, He added.

"The core of China-US economic and trade relations is mutual benefit and win-win outcomes," He said. "The ministry has been in regular communication with its US counterparts to this end."

China hopes to strengthen dialogue and consultation with the US, appropriately manage differences, and expand mutually beneficial cooperation, He added.

The White House did not sign any immediate executive orders imposing additional tariffs on China, but it directed relevant agencies to investigate and remedy persistent trade deficits.

With a population of over 1.4 billion and the world's largest and fastest-growing middle-income group, China's market potential is immense, providing ample opportunities for expanding imports, including high-quality US products and services to meet the country's rapidly expanding market demand, Sang said.

"Strengthening trade collaboration between the two countries can help optimize the allocation of resources and drive economic structural adjustments in both countries. This, in turn, can deepen the mutually beneficial nature of the China-US economic relationship," Sang said.

Strengthening trade ties between the world's two largest economies can also bolster global market confidence and maintain the stability of global industrial and supply chains, Sang added.

Strong appetite displayed for quality of life, wellness, meaningful experiences

By FAN FEIFEI
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Chinese consumers are demonstrating a strong appetite for quality of life, wellness and meaningful experiences with increased spending confidence and intentions despite an overall cautious sentiment, according to a new report released by global consulting firm AlixPartners.

The report, based on a survey of over 3,000 respondents across China, said 41 percent of the interviewed consumers intend to spend more on health-related products, while more than 30 percent plan to increase their spending on groceries, clothing and travel as they continue to prioritize wellness and practicality.

It is noteworthy that more than 40 percent of young consumers plan to spend more on travel in 2025. Travel and holiday spending lead the way in consumer confidence growth from 2024 to 2025, fueled by a surge

in demand and a shift toward meaningful and experience-driven consumption, the report noted.

The focus on self-care and quality of life is also reflected in the moderate confidence growth of spending related to entertainment, dining out, sporting goods, toys, books and cosmetics.

The report stated the Gen Z consumers — people born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s — in first-tier cities are spearheading the travel spending surge, followed by middle and high-income individuals in second-tier cities and affluent seniors in lower-tier cities.

The luxury sector is seeing recovered confidence among high-income consumers in first and second-tier cities, yet the spending growth will likely be tempered in the short term as shoppers prioritize quality, value and sustainable options over impulsive high-ticket purchases.

Moreover, affluent seniors and middle-income urban residents are

driving demand for essential and discretionary goods, presenting vast growth opportunities for businesses that can adapt their strategies and engagement with precision amid the evolving consumer landscape, it added.

China's economy has entered a transformative phase, and while consumers are generally more cautious with their spending, the survey revealed that perceptions of economic prospects vary significantly by geography, income and age group — differences that have profound implications for their spending, said Lisa Hu, partner and managing director of the Consumer & Retail Practice at AlixPartners China.

Hu noted that to thrive in this new era, businesses must go beyond a broad-based approach and demonstrate agility, innovation and a sophisticated understanding of targeted customer behavior across categories.

Despite the emergence of new channels such as social e-commerce

and livestreaming in the past few years, traditional e-commerce platforms have taken a significant position for consumers.

According to the survey, online channels remain the dominant purchasing avenue for most categories, especially for interest-related goods like travel, entertainment, clothing, beauty and cosmetics, toys and books, as 60 percent of such purchases are conducted online.

"China continues to set the global benchmark for e-commerce innovation thanks to its expansive ecosystem with an abundance of choices," Hu said, adding that retailers need to frequently and consistently monitor consumer behavior to navigate this complex landscape effectively.

An integrated approach remains key to customer engagement given that shoppers utilize a variety of online and offline channels to research and make purchases.

Businesses should continue to innovate and deploy cutting-edge



Shoppers buy goods for Spring Festival at a supermarket in Hefei, Anhui province. CHEN SANHU / FOR CHINA DAILY

digital tools that help build deeper emotional connections with consumers, aligning their strategies, investment and execution with China's uniquely distinct market dynamics, according to the consultancy.

China's retail sales, a significant indicator of consumption strength, rose 3.5 percent year-on-year in 2024, said the National Bureau of Statistics. Online sales remained a bright spot, jumping 7.2 percent year-on-year last year.

WORLDUS

Bill aims to revoke China's trade status

US House looks to pull China's longtime Permanent Normal Trade Relations status

By HENG WEILI in New York
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Another round of anti-China legislation was proposed in the US House of Representatives on Thursday.

Called the "Restoring Trade Fairness Act", the bill's aim is to revoke China's Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status.

US President Donald Trump, who campaigned on raising tariffs on China to 60 percent or higher, proposed an additional 10 percent tariff on Chinese imports earlier this week, the first of his second term.

While Trump didn't comment on the legislation, in an address via video to the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, on Thursday, he said he wants "a level playing field" on trade.

In 2024, according to data from the US Census Bureau, the US had a trade deficit of more than \$270

billion with China. The US imported more than \$401 billion in goods and services from China last year, while exporting around \$131 billion.

The latest congressional legislation would place a minimum 35 percent tariff on nonstrategic goods and a 100 percent tariff on strategic goods from China, which would be phased in over five years.

It also would end the "de minimis" rule for China, or the \$800 value level below which imports are not subject to customs duties. If de minimis were revoked, it would affect e-commerce websites such as Temu and Shein, which are highly popular with US consumers.

"For too long, permanent normal trade relations with China have undermined our manufacturing base, shifted American jobs abroad, and allowed the CCP to exploit our markets while betraying the promise of fair competition," said

Representative John Moolenaar, a Michigan Republican, chair of a House committee to counter China. "In response, this legislation will safeguard US national security, enhance supply chain resilience, and bring manufacturing jobs back to America and our allies."

Moolenaar proposed the legislation in the House with Representative Tom Suozzi, a New York Democrat.

A similar bill was introduced in the Senate by Senator Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, and Senator Jim Bank, an Indiana Republican.

Marco Rubio, a former senator from Florida who this week was confirmed as secretary of state, was an original co-sponsor of the bill when it was introduced in November. Rubio has been a frequent critic of China.

Some of the revenue generated, according to the bill, would help farmers and manufacturers facing reciprocal tariffs by China.

The bill follows an executive order

by Trump this week that directs the commerce secretary and the US trade representative to review PNTR.

In an analysis published on Jan 17 by the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, the authors, Warwick J. McKibbin, an Australian economics professor, and Marcus Noland, executive-vice president of PIIIE, wrote: "If the US imposed an additional 10 percent tariff on China and China responded in kind, US GDP would be \$55 billion less over the four years of the second Trump administration, and \$128 billion less in China."

"Inflation would increase 20 basis points in the US, and after an initial dip, 30 basis points in China."

Congress voted to give normal trade status to China in 2000, under then-President Bill Clinton. That, in turn, allowed China to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), which also provided American consumers the benefit of purchasing lower-priced Chinese imports.

Countries with PNTR status have

a tariff of around 3 percent on average, although China has been paying more since 2018, when Trump's began imposing tariffs in his first term. The previous Biden administration kept most of those tariffs in place and raised other ones, such as on electric vehicles and batteries.

"The only certainty is that new tariffs will be costly for the United States. While the ultimate impact on prices will depend on import demand and supply elasticities, research on the US-China trade war found resounding evidence of complete pass-through of tariffs to importers," according to another analysis published by PIIIE in December.

"The implication for the domestic market is that American consumers and firms will bear the effect of higher tariffs, with substantial costs for the average American household, and a burden that falls more heavily on lower-income households."

Only four countries do not have normal trade relations with the US: Belarus, Cuba, North Korea and Russia.

Trump gets tough on border quickly

By MAYZHOU in Houston
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Although monthly migrant crossings along the US-Mexico border have dropped by about half to two-thirds in the past six months, US President Donald Trump declared a "national emergency" on the border on his first day back in office.

On Monday, Inauguration Day, Trump vowed to deploy the military and National Guard to seal the border and deport millions of undocumented migrants already in the US.

Trump also reactivated the "Remain in Mexico" program to keep asylum seekers outside of US territory. He suspended former president Joe Biden's asylum program for migrants fleeing Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Haiti, canceling all scheduled appointments and flights for approved refugees.

While Trump was issuing the orders, more than 2,000 migrants from various countries began marching from southern Mexico hoping to enter the US, despite Trump's deportation order.

On Tuesday, Mexico began setting up a large tent complex near the border in Juarez, a border city across from El Paso, Texas, in preparation to shelter those who seek to cross the border despite Trump's order.

The center should be operational in the next five days and will provide food, medical checkups, temporary lodging and a \$98 debit card that deported Mexicans can use to return to their home states if desired, Interior Secretary Rosa Icela Rodriguez said Tuesday in Mexico City. Other shelter centers also are being planned along a few other Mexico border cities.

Mexico officials said they can handle the expulsion of migrants because migration flows have been slow in recent months.

"We are at the lowest crossing levels — 78 percent less (than last January) — and this means the conditions prevalent on our border don't represent unmanageable levels," Mexico Foreign Minister Juan Ramon de la Fuente said.

According to data from the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), illegal crossings along the US-Mexico border have been hovering around 100,000 a month since July 2024 which is about one-third to one-half of the flows in the same month in the previous year.

Also on Tuesday, a group of CBP officers in riot gear were seen marching near the temporarily closed border bridge in Brownsville, Texas.

Brownville resident Jaylee Cadriel told Border Report that he was waiting in a car for his pregnant wife to cross the border when the CBP officers screamed at him: "Get out of here! Get out of here!"

"I cross often," he told Border Report. "I have never seen anything like this."

Texas was once part of Mexico, and Cadriel said that almost everyone in Brownsville has Mexican ancestry. With or without US citizenship, "they're still Mexican, but the way they act toward us is messed up," he said.

On Wednesday, the Trump administration said it would send 1,500 active-duty troops by month's end.

According to a statement by Acting Secretary of Defense Robert Salesses, the Pentagon is also sending helicopters with associated crews and intelligence analysts to support increased detection and monitoring efforts.

The military tasks include providing airlift to "support DHS deportation flights of more than five thousand illegal aliens" in detention and "assisting in the construction of temporary and permanent physical barriers."

The Department of Justice (DOJ) ordered US attorneys around the country to investigate and prosecute law enforcement officials in states and cities if they refuse to enforce the new immigration policies.

The House of Representatives approved a bill that requires the detention of unauthorized immigrants accused of theft and violent crimes on Wednesday. The Senate approved the legislation, called the Laken Riley Act, earlier this week, so the bill will now head to Trump for his signings. The legislation is named after a University of Georgia nursing student who was murdered last year by a Venezuelan migrant.

US students ring in Year of Snake with cultural experiences

By LIA ZHU in San Francisco
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In a vibrant celebration of the upcoming Chinese New Year, young American students tried their hand at calligraphy writing and relic repairing to experience traditional Chinese culture through an innovative "Cultural Open Day" event at the Chinese Consulate General in San Francisco.

Twenty-nine students, accompanied by their parents and teachers from William Land Elementary School in Sacramento, California, and Nam Kue School in San Francisco, gathered on Wednesday for the unique cultural immersion.

During the Chinese New Year, also known as Spring Festival, writing the Chinese character for *fu* on red paper and pasting it on doors is a cherished tradition signifying wishes for good fortune and happiness in the coming year.

The students embraced the custom by learning to write the character in snake-shaped calligraphy on traditional red paper.

The excitement peaked as students tackled the delicate art of restoring miniature Terracotta Warriors, thanks to the specialized restoration kits provided by the Shaanxi Museum.

Among the enthusiastic participants was 12-year-old Zoe Gotham Wilson, whose eyes lit up as she showcased her restored figurine.

"I know they are Terracotta Warriors. I'm interested in Chinese history. They made them into sculptures, which is really cool," the sixth-grader from William Land school told China Daily in fluent Chinese.

She already has visited Shanghai, and now dreams of traveling to Xi'an to see the real warriors in person.

The students also participated in interactive cultural quizzes and savored Chinese dumplings, fully immersing themselves in the festivities.

For many of the young learners, born in the Year of the Snake themselves, the event offered a rare glimpse into authentic Chinese

traditions. Acting Consul General Yang Shouzheng connected with the students by explaining how the snake symbolizes wisdom, flexibility and resilience in Chinese culture, encouraging them to approach life's challenges with similar qualities.

The celebration took on special significance this year, as UNESCO recently recognized the Spring Festival's cultural importance by adding it to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Teachers said hands-on learning is more powerful than just teaching them about the significance of the Chinese New Year.

"Students understand better when they participate hands-on, rather than just learning from textbooks," said Miaoyun Chen from Nam Kue School. "When writing the character *fu* by hand, the impression becomes deeper."

Feifei Xie from William Land school highlighted the event's importance in bridging cultural gaps. Many of her students, though enthusiastic about Chinese culture, have never visited China and primarily learn through textbooks, television or the internet.

"The understanding and impression of China is quite different from reality," she noted, emphasizing how experiences like these provide authentic perspectives on Chinese traditions, including hospitality customs.

The event builds on previous successful cultural exchanges, including visits to the Chinese consul general's residence that left lasting impressions on students through thoughtfully arranged activities and venue presentations, said Xie.

Looking ahead, Yang encouraged the students to participate in China's initiative of inviting 50,000 young people from the US over the course of five years to visit China for exchange and study programs.

"I hope, in the Year of the Snake, more young Americans will visit China, make friends with Chinese youth, and contribute to the inheritance of China-US friendship," he said.



Zoe Gotham Wilson, 12, a student at William Land Elementary School in Sacramento, California, shows her restored miniature Terracotta Warriors at the Cultural Open Day event hosted by the Chinese Consulate General in San Francisco on Wednesday.

LIA ZHU / CHINA DAILY



A firefighter sprays water as he monitors flames caused by the Hughes Fire along a roadside in Castaic, California, on Wednesday. ETHAN SPOWE / AP

In LA, call for better land management

By RENA LI in Los Angeles
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As Southern California coped with a new round of devastating wildfires, discussions centered on how to prevent such destruction in the future.

Evacuation orders were lifted Thursday for tens of thousands of people as firefighters with air support slowed the spread of a wildfire churning through mountains north of Los Angeles, but new blazes erupted in San Diego County.

The Hughes Fire broke out late Wednesday morning and charred nearly 16 square miles (41 square kilometers) of trees and brush near Castaic Lake, a recreation area about 40 miles from the still-burning Eaton and Palisades fires.

Two new blazes were reported Thursday in the San Diego area. Further south, near the US-Mexico border, another blaze was quickly spreading through the Otay Mountain Wilderness.

Rain is forecast for the weekend, potentially ending a monthslong dry spell. Winds are less strong than when the Palisades and Eaton fires broke out, allowing for aircraft to dump tens of thousands of gallons of fire retardant.

Nearly 54,000 residents in the Castaic area were under evacuation warnings, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said Thursday.

The low humidity, bone-dry vegetation and strong winds came as firefighters continued battling the devastating Palisades and Eaton fires. Officials remained concerned that those fires could break their containment lines. Containment of the Palisades Fire reached 72 percent; the Eaton Fire was 95 percent contained on Thursday.

The two fires have killed at least 28 people and destroyed more than 14,000 structures since they broke out Jan 7.

The fires highlight the region's increasing vulnerability, linked to climate change, poor land management and unpredictable weather patterns.

Amid the destruction, experts stressed that this crisis also offers a

chance to implement transformative solutions — through enhanced land management, sustainable practices, and policies aimed at addressing the underlying causes.

Dan Thorman, president of Colli-descope, the organizer of Los Angeles Climate Week, pointed to a decade of minimal rainfall, followed by unusually heavy rains over the past two years, as a key factor.

The rains spurred significant vegetation growth in the mountains and surrounding areas, which dried out and became highly flammable.

"These dry conditions, combined with strong winds, created the perfect scenario for a large fire to ignite and spread rapidly," Thorman said. "I personally believe it has to do with climate change."

The Santa Ana winds, typically occurring in the fall and winter, push dry air from the inland deserts of California and the Southwest toward the coast, according to the National Weather Service.

"The intense winds not only accelerated the fire's spread but also made it unsafe for firefighters to combat the blaze effectively, preventing the use of aircraft for water drops. Consequently, the fire expanded into the city, causing significant damage."

Critics like JC Arce, director of Colli-descope, have called out local governments for failing to effectively manage forests and reserves.

"Governments and local agencies, especially in LA County and the city of Los Angeles, have not taken into account how to manage forest and reserve landscapes," Arce said.

Unchecked growth of plants, including low-hanging shrubs and trees, has created a dangerous accumulation of flammable material. These plants, often unsuitable for the region's arid climate, act as fuel, making fires more intense and harder to control, according to Arce. He emphasized the need for better land management, thinning overgrown vegetation, and adopting sustainable practices to mitigate future wildfire risks.

"So, there's actually a lot of opportunity that local businesses and

governments can take to better manage the environment and ensure wildfires like the ones we've just seen don't happen moving forward," Arce said.

Ekaterina Sky, an impact artist who works with Colli-descope, highlighted what she called another critical factor: the degradation of soil due to monoculture farming. "If we look at the ecosystem around Los Angeles, it's clear how monoculture farming has degraded the soil," Sky told China Daily.

Monoculture farming in California involves growing a single crop type over a large area of land, which is common in the United States.

She explained that planting the same crop repeatedly depletes soil health, reduces biodiversity, and disrupts the natural cycle of precipitation.

"By disrupting this cycle, we're effectively drying out the land," Sky said, calling for a shift to regenerative agriculture, which she said could restore soil health, improve water retention, and rebuild the land's ability to sustain itself."

California will spend \$2.5 billion to help the Los Angeles area recover under a relief package signed Thursday by Governor Gavin Newsom.

The aid won approval a day before President Donald Trump is set to visit to survey the damage from the blazes. He has suggested any federal wildfire relief should come with conditions.

The legislation includes \$2.5 billion for the state's disaster response efforts such as evacuations, sheltering survivors and removing household hazardous waste. Lawmakers also approved \$4 million for local governments to streamline approvals for rebuilding homes, and \$1 million to support school districts and help them rebuild.

Agencies contributed to this story.

WORLD

Top US diplomat vows 'steadfast support' for Israel

JERUSALEM — US Secretary of State Marco Rubio reaffirmed the country's "steadfast support" for Israel, days into a fragile cease-fire in the Gaza Strip and a large-scale raid in the occupied West Bank.

As Israel pursued its deadly operation in Jenin, Rubio assured Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Washington's continued backing.

Rubio spoke to Netanyahu from Washington on Wednesday night to "underscore that maintaining the United States' steadfast support for Israel is a top priority for President (Donald) Trump," State Department spokeswoman Tammy Bruce said.

Washington will continue to work "tirelessly" to help free the remaining hostages in Gaza, Bruce added.

Israel and Hamas began implementing a three-stage cease-fire in their 15-month conflict on Sunday. The current six-week stage of the deal includes the release of Israeli captives from Gaza and Palestinians from Israeli prisons, as well as intensified humanitarian aid delivery to Gaza and a partial withdrawal of Israeli troops from the enclave.

An Israeli security delegation arrived in Cairo on Wednesday to continue negotiations on the second phase of the truce deal, according to Egyptian sources.

The delegation includes officials from the intelligence agency Mossad and the Shin Bet security agency, the sources told Xinhua News Agency on condition of anonymity.

"The discussions focused on the execution of the second phase of the cease-fire agreement, including the reopening of the Palestinian side of the Rafah border crossing to allow the passage of injured Palestinians," the sources added.

The talks also addressed the presence of Israeli troops in the Philadelphi Corridor on the Gaza-Egypt border, with Israel seeking a partial withdrawal while Egypt



Turkiye's Humanitarian Relief Foundation sets up tents for Palestinian families whose houses were destroyed, in Gaza City on Tuesday. DAWOUD ABO ALKAS VIA GETTY IMAGES

insists on a full Israeli withdrawal from the area, according to the sources.

More aid into Gaza

Meanwhile, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said on Wednesday that it is stepping up support for people across Gaza, increasing the flow of incoming supplies and deliveries, and scaling up storage capacity, repair work, lifesaving services, and addressing needs. It is distributing food parcels and flour and working to reopen bakeries.

The agency said 808 aid trucks entered the Gaza Strip on Wednesday, citing information received from Israeli authorities and the guarantors of the cease-fire agree-

ment — Egypt, Qatar and the United States.

"Humanitarian partners are carrying out rapid assessments in newly accessible areas to identify people's most urgent needs, including water, hygiene, sanitation and healthcare," it said. "They are also stepping up disease surveillance efforts."

As Rubio and Netanyahu spoke, Israel's West Bank operation, dubbed the Iron Wall, was pressing on.

The Israeli military said that it has "neutralized over 10 terrorists," while the Palestinian Health Ministry said the operation has killed 10 people and wounded 35 others.

"The situation is very difficult," Jenin Governor Kamal Abu al-Rub told AFP. "The occupation army has bulldozed all the roads leading to

Jenin camp and the Jenin government hospital ... There is shooting and explosions."

Israeli forces have detained about 20 people from villages around Jenin since the operation began on Tuesday, he said.

The Palestinian Authority's Foreign Ministry accused Israel of "collective punishment" and stated that the raid was part of an Israeli plan aimed at "gradually annexing the occupied West Bank."

Netanyahu said the raid aimed to "eradicate terrorism" in Jenin.

The Israeli government has accused Iran of attempting to funnel weapons and funds to militants in the West Bank.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Ex-defense chief testifies at Yoon's trial

South Korea's impeached president attends hearing for the second time

By YANG HAN in Hong Kong
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South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol directly questioned former defense minister Kim Yong-hyun on Thursday in the fourth hearing of his impeachment trial, with Kim refuting allegations related to Yoon's Dec 3 martial law declaration.

Attired in a navy suit and red tie, the same outfit he wore when he first attended the impeachment trial at the Constitutional Court two days ago, Yoon came in person for the second time — which also included the cross-examination of the first witness, Yonhap News Agency reported.

Questioned for two and a half hours, Kim said he was the one who wrote a note to then finance minister Choi Sang-mok — now acting president — to ask him to draft a budget for an emergency legislative body.

As a key piece of evidence related to the insurrection charges, Yoon is accused of handing the note to Choi when martial law was declared. The imposition of martial law, which plunged the country into political chaos, lasted just six hours before lawmakers voted it down.

Regarding the deployment of troops to the National Assembly building, Kim said Yoon only ordered "a small number" of soldiers, against his advice to mobilize up to 60,000.

He also said Yoon's purpose in mobilizing the troops was not to stop lawmakers from voting down the decree but to "watch closely for people approaching to disrupt the maintenance of order and allow selective entry," Kim was quoted as saying by Yonhap.

Kim was also questioned by the legal representatives from the National Assembly, who are serving as the prosecutors in the trial.

Kim originally refused to be questioned by the National Assembly lawyers but later reversed his stance after being warned by the court that refusing to testify could affect the judgment of his credibility.

He also said he drafted the martial law proclamation, which included a ban on all political activities, based on past martial law documents, and that Yoon did not read it carefully.

Kim was chosen by Yoon's lawyers as a witness for the trial. He was arrested on Dec 8 over his alleged role in the martial law decree and attempted suicide on Dec 10.

During the hearing, Yoon said the martial law declaration was not a failure because he had always planned to end it quickly.

"It ended a little earlier than expected," Yoon said, adding that he immediately ordered the withdrawal of troops after the National Assembly voted against it.

He said the mobilization of troops was legal.

The Constitutional Court received the case on Dec 14 after the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion against Yoon. The court has up to 180 days to decide whether to remove Yoon from office or to reinstate him.

(Yoon's lawyers) are not making that many credible arguments in court. It almost seems like they are directly addressing Yoon's supporters (and are) more interested in changing the political wind in South Korea."

Jeong W Hwang,
United States-licensed
lawyer in Seoul

'Changing political wind'

Kim "made it clear that he is basically taking the side of Yoon", said Jeong W Hwang, a United States-licensed lawyer in Seoul. "But I think overall it will have a very low impact on how the court will review the issue."

Yoon's lawyers "are not making that many credible arguments in court", Hwang told China Daily. "It almost seems like they are directly addressing Yoon's supporters" and are "more interested in changing the political wind in South Korea."

Hwang said he expects Yoon's legal team to keep delaying things as much as possible in the hope that the political fortune will change. This includes how he will deal with the investigation to be carried out by government prosecutors.

Before Thursday's hearing, the Corruption Investigation Office probing the martial law declaration said it had transferred Yoon's case to prosecutors for indictment over charges of leading an insurrection and abuse of power.

The CIO does not have indictment powers against a president.

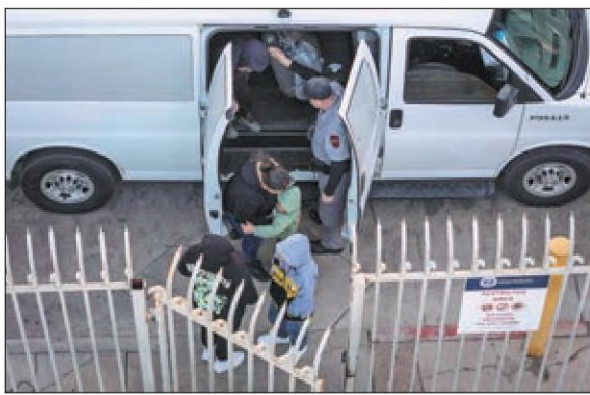
The prosecution said it would immediately start an investigation. It was expected to indict Yoon around Feb 5.



South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol attends the fourth hearing of his impeachment trial at the Constitutional Court in Seoul on Thursday. XINHUA

Deport mission

Immigrants disembark from a US Customs and Border Protection van before being deported back to Mexico, on Wednesday in Nogales, Arizona. US President Donald Trump, who declared a national emergency at the US-Mexico border on his first day in office, ordered 1,500 additional military personnel to strengthen border security, his spokeswoman said on Wednesday. JOHN MOORE / AFP



Spain faces up to its 'housing emergency'

By JONATHAN POWELL in London
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Spain's housing crisis has evolved from a social challenge into a political flashpoint, as soaring costs and property investment reshape cities and threaten to create a two-tier society.

From Madrid to Barcelona, the transformation is visible on every corner, with real estate speculation and a surge in tourist rentals driving out local businesses.

Analysis shared by the El Pais newspaper showed that rents have risen 80 percent in a decade, with nearly half of tenants now spending 40 percent of their income on housing.

Typical spending on housing costs is far above the European Union average of 27 percent, according to a recent Bank of Spain report.

Faced with this crisis, the government has now declared a "housing situation emergency".

The issue has dominated Spain's political agenda during the past year, with protests against tourism's effect on housing markets erupting across major cities.

Last week, Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez unveiled a 12-point plan to address the situation, including incentives for affordable rentals, stricter rules on tourist apartments, and notably, a proposed 100 percent tax on property purchases by non-EU residents.

The opposition conservative People's Party has rejected the government's "xenophobic" measures and instead proposed tax cuts.

Sanchez blamed the previous government, saying its market-driven approach for the decade up to 2018

had caused devastating social effects. In comments to The Guardian, academics analyzing the situation confirmed the severity of the crisis.

"The prime minister used the words 'housing emergency', and I think that's what it is in many ways," said Ignasi Marti, director of the Esade Business School's social innovation unit in Barcelona and head of its decent housing observatory. "The supply isn't there, people can't access housing, and housing situations that just aren't decent have become normalized over the past few years."

'Not a real solution'

While the proposed 100 percent tax on non-EU buyers grabbed headlines, Marti said it was not a real solution.

"It's not going to solve the problem," he said, explaining that non-EU purchases represent a small portion of the market. "And anyway, you can't impose that on EU buyers."

The scale of Spain's empty housing stock demands action, said another expert.

"They need to attack the problem much harder, and they need to put an end to people buying flats to speculate," said Claudio Milano, a researcher at the University of Barcelona's social anthropology department and an expert on overtourism. He noted that 3.8 million homes, or 14 percent of the total supply, lie empty in Spain.

"That needs to stop now, and then we can start talking about tax breaks. But the fire needs to be put out before we do anything else, and to do that, you need a ban on people buying flats for speculation," he said.

Housing issues have been identified in urban neighborhoods across Europe, including in Paris and Lon-

don, which are rapidly transforming into tourist havens, pushing long-term residents to the margins as costs rise.

France last year strengthened existing rent control policies, and the United Kingdom has implemented measures to increase the supply of affordable housing, including setting targets for new developments to include a percentage of affordable units.

The Guardian reported that in Barcelona's Eixample district, where tourist flats make up one in every 57 homes, residents remain skeptical about the proposals from the government.

"The demand for more public housing hasn't arisen because of an increase in population, but because the housing available is unaffordable, which leads to more evictions and, in turn raises the demand for affordable public housing," said Jaume Artigues, a spokesperson for the local residents' association. "It's a vicious circle, but the root of the problem is speculation."

In his speech to Parliament, Sanchez said Spain lags far behind its European neighbors in terms of social housing, with just 2.5 percent of its housing stock designated as social housing, compared with France's 14 percent and the Netherlands' 34 percent.

"If we don't act, European and Spanish society will end up divided into two kinds of people," he said. "Those who get one or more houses from their parents and can spend most of their income on things like education and travel, and those who spend their lives working to pay the rent and who end up as old people who don't own the home they live in."

Briefly

GERMANY Man, 2-year-old child killed in knife attack

A knife attacker killed a two-year-old child and a man on Wednesday in a public park in the German city of Aschaffenburg, where police arrested a 28-year-old Afghan man as the main suspect. Chancellor Olaf Scholz condemned the "unbelievable act of terror" on a play school group that left three more people wounded, and demanded to know why the failed asylum-seeker had been able to stay in the country. The latest in a series of deadly knife attacks in Germany threatened to spark a new debate over immigration ahead of a general election on Feb 23.

INDONESIA Landslide death toll rises to 22

The death toll from a landslide on Indonesia's main island of Java rose to 22 on Thursday, officials said, as rescuers raced against time and bad weather to find survivors. Waters from flooded rivers tore through nine villages in Pekalongan regency of Central Java Province and landslides tumbled onto mountainside hamlets after torrential rains on Monday. "The victims who were found dead are now 22. Four people are still being searched for," Budiono, head of the search and rescue agency from nearby city Semarang, told AFP.

SOUTH KOREA Runway barriers to be removed

South Korea will remove concrete embankments near airport runways in response to a recent air disaster, media reports said on Thursday. The embankments contain antennas called localizers designed to guide aircraft during landings and have been blamed for making the Dec 29 crash of a Jeju Air flight worse. The Boeing 737-800 skidded off a runway in Muan after its landing gear failed to deploy, slamming into the concrete structure and bursting into flames, killing all but two of the 181 people on board. The Transport Ministry said it will replace the structures with breakable materials, the Korea JoongAng Daily and other media reported.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA