

Staying smart

Innovation, AI help startups break Western hegemony BUSINESS, PAGE 9



Festive fireworks light up kinship across Strait CHINA, PAGE 5



Peony power

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CHINA DAILY

GLOBAL EDITION 中国日报 TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2025

MODERNIZATION FOR ALL

China, Africa eye bright future

Green cooperation projects deliver significant benefits to tens of thousands across continent

By ZHAO JIA zhaojia@chinadaily.com.cn

As the sun dipped below the horizon and cast a fiery glow over Koniobla, a village southeast of Bamako, the capital of Mali, the darkness crept in swiftly, wrapping the village in silence.

For years, nighttime meant the end of all activities in the village in the West African country, but things changed just one day after China's solar technology brought light, as well as vitality, to the community in 2023.

"We no longer worry about access to water or electricity. Thank you, our Chinese friends, for helping us build

power stations, install lights and dig water wells," said Jean Doumbia, the village chief.

As one of the least-developed countries in the world, Mali faces a severe electricity shortage, with its rural electrification rate standing at below 20 percent, despite its abundance of photovoltaic resources.

The village of Koniobla, meanwhile, had long struggled with underdeveloped infrastructure and an almost complete lack of electricity.

Thanks to the China-aided Mali Solar Demonstration Village Project, a total of 1,195 off-grid solar home systems, 200 solar streetlights, 17 solar water pumps, and two central-

ized solar power systems have been installed in the vicinity of Koniobla, directly benefiting tens of thousands of residents.

Currently, around 600 million people in Africa live without electricity, despite Africa's considerable renewable energy potential.

Experts noted that green cooperation is set to become another highlight of China-Africa collaboration, as Beijing vigorously supports the continent in addressing climate change and making progress in the green drive.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged China's continuous support for Africa's green development during his first overseas visit this year, which took him to four African countries in January.

Wang noted that the installed

capacity of photovoltaic power stations jointly built by China and Africa has exceeded 1.5 gigawatts, lighting up many homes on the continent.

"President Xi Jinping proposed that China and Africa should jointly advance modernization that is eco-friendly. This is the common goal of China and Africa and one of the important tasks of my visit," he said.

Wang vowed to build the "Africa Solar Belt" program to help Africa truly embark on the path of green, low-carbon development.

The program, which was launched by China at the inaugural Africa Climate Summit in September 2023, aims to provide electricity and lighting solutions to 50,000 impoverished households that lack power.

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Connectivity at core of partnership with ASEAN

Southeast Asia, represented by the 10-member bloc of Association of Southeast Asian Nations, has been the top trading partner of China since 2020, while the latter has consistently been occupying the top slot of the bloc's trading partners for over 15 years.

It is an exemplary model of multilateral partnership fostered under the framework of China's neighborhood diplomacy. The mutual trade in goods continues to grow by leaps and bounds.

Be that as it may, the fast-growing China-ASEAN relations are not sufficient to be underpinned by the economic pillar alone.

There is now a pressing need to strengthen people-to-people connectivity, which is critical in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. This is particularly so in light of incessant attempts by external powers to stoke instability in the region.

While we have every reason to celebrate the progress of the China-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership, it is equally relevant and crucial to scrutinize a few areas of concern that warrant our attention and urgency to address.

People first

As more Chinese supply chains are moving ashore to Southeast Asia in the wake of post-COVID-19 recovery, more varieties of affordable Chinese merchandise are now flooding the ASEAN markets. The growing trade surplus in favor of China has thus been garnering much attention. Trade deficits of ASEAN member states should be given prompt attention before the imbalance is exploited by detractors and populists alike, in pursuit of their respective agenda. No way should it be dismissed nonchalantly as the trade momentum is still going strong.

WORLD WATCH By Ong Tee Keat

At the same time, the sporadic echoing of the West's "overcapacity" claims is worth monitoring. Though the demand for "anti-dumping" tariffs against specific Chinese merchandise, allegedly stemming from the overcapacity claim, might be too far-fetched to derail the enduring ties, the blows aimed at the China-ASEAN partnership should never be glossed over. It may signify a new wave of destabilizing moves intended to chip the foundation of the solid China-ASEAN partnership.

After a decade of BRI implementation, China and respective host countries in Southeast Asia should by now be more astute in addressing communication concerns. Clear and distinct definitions should be attached to projects and programs earmarked under the BRI framework. Abuse of the BRI status must be stopped to prevent any confusion from arising, particularly when certain failed projects undertaken by private entrepreneurs may risk tarnishing the credibility of BRI.

Parallel to this, China's State-owned enterprises undertaking the BRI projects alongside the local partners of host countries should be more proactive in playing their ambassadorial roles by reaching out to the local community. Public communication via proactive community outreach is absolutely crucial for the Chinese SOEs. After all, BRI projects and programs are meant to endear China to the host countries, particularly the public.

See Ties, page 3

Eggs-orbitant prices



A grocery store employee in Staten Island, New York, points to the price tag for eggs on Monday. Egg prices are surging due to an outbreak of bird flu, which has led to the culling of poultry flocks across the United States. HAO DONG / CHINA DAILY

Musk's latest target: Hotel lodging for migrants

By HENG WEILI in New York hengweili@chinadailyusa.com

The revelations of the Elon Musk-led US Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) continued their furious pace on Monday.

The latest splash was a claim that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recently paid \$59 million to house migrants in New York City luxury hotels.

"Sending this money violated the law and is in gross insubordination to the President's executive order," Musk wrote on X.com, the social media platform that he owns. "That money is meant for American disaster relief and instead is being spent on high end hotels for illegals! A clawback demand will be made today to recoup those funds."

US President Donald Trump issued various spending, hiring and regulatory freezes soon after he took office last month. Some of those executive orders have been challenged in federal court. Cameron Hamilton, the acting head of FEMA, said on Monday that he's suspending payments sent to New York City to house migrants.

"I want to thank the @DOGE team

for making me aware of this. Effective yesterday these payments have all been suspended from FEMA. Personnel will be held accountable," Hamilton posted on X.

City officials challenged Musk's claim, saying that the \$59 million is part of planned FEMA funding to help cover migrant housing costs.

The money is part of \$118 million in FEMA funding under the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) to help manage the migrant crisis, according to city records, news radio station 1010 WINS reported.

The city hasn't been notified of any pause in funding, said Elizabeth Garcia, deputy press secretary for Mayor Eric Adams.

Garcia told the New York Daily News that while some migrants are being housed in hotels, the rooms do not fall under the "luxury" category.

She said that the majority of migrant hotel rooms are outside Manhattan, and the government has paid an average \$152 a night for rooms, according to a 2024 city comptroller report.

FEMA's contribution to New York City's migrant response is \$237.3 million, with \$74.4 million already allocated, including \$25.5 million from the

SSP and \$49 million from the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, the New York Post reported.

City officials stated that only \$19 million of the total federal funding has been spent on hotels, covering both high-end and budget accommodations, according to the Post.

Trisha McLaughlin, spokesperson for the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) — to which FEMA belongs — pointed to recent statements by DHS Secretary Kristi Noem.

"As Secretary Noem said yesterday, we must get rid of FEMA the way it exists today," McLaughlin told The Associated Press on Monday. "This is yet another egregious example."

The money is separate from the disaster relief fund, which is FEMA's main funding source to help people and governments affected by disasters.

Garcia said that the city received \$81 million in payments from the federal government for immigration-related costs last week in two separate payments — one of which was about \$59 million. The payment of \$81 million, Garcia said, covered reimbursements for November 2023 to October 2024, including hotels, security and food.

City resources are under pressure

after an influx of roughly 230,000 migrants since the spring of 2022.

In a trip to North Carolina last month to survey damage by Hurricane Helene in September, Trump said he was considering "getting rid of" FEMA and he's creating a task force to conduct a "full-scale review" of it.

A federal judge found on Monday that the Trump administration hasn't fully followed his order to unfreeze federal spending and told the White House to release billions of dollars in funding. The Trump administration quickly appealed the ruling.

US District Court Judge John McConnell ordered the Trump administration to "immediately take every step necessary" to follow his temporary restraining order halting plans for a wide freeze of federal funding.

"Each executive order will hold up in court because every action of the Trump-Vance administration is completely lawful," Harrison Fields, a White House spokesman, told The New York Times. "Any legal challenge against it is nothing more than an attempt to undermine the will of the American people."

Agencies contributed to this story.

ANCIENT ACADEMIES THRIVE, AS YOUNG PEOPLE'S INTEREST REVIVED

Bailudong institution at forefront of expounding on history of foreign exchanges

By ZHAO RUINAN in Nanchang zhaorunan@chinadaily.com.cn



During students' winter vacation in late January, Bailudong Academy, located at the foot of Lushan Mountain in Jiujiang, Jiangxi province, welcomed many young visitors.

Among them was 12-year-old Wang Jing, who along with her parents had traveled from Wuhan in neighboring Hubei province to visit the academy.

"Bailudong Academy was very famous in ancient times. We wanted to show our child how people

studied in the past and what the study environment was like," said He Fang, Wang's mother.

Bailudong Academy, also known as White Deer Grotto Academy, is one of ancient China's four great academies, alongside Yuelu Academy in Changsha, Hunan province; Songyang Academy in Dengfeng, Henan province; and Yingtian Academy in Shangqiu, Henan.

See Academy, page 2

Time to return



Palestinians ride in a truck with their belongings in Gaza city on Sunday as they make their way back home after Israeli forces withdrew from the Netzarim Corridor, a strip of land that bisects Gaza from north to south, allowing people to pass freely in both directions. DAWOOD ABU ALKAS / REUTERS See story, page 7

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Left: A pavilion of Yuelu Academy in Changsha, Hunan province. **Right:** The gate of Xianxian Academy, which is part of the building complex of Bailudong Academy in Jiujiang, Jiangxi province.
DUAN CHANGZHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Academy: Legacy of wisdom, exchange still shines



A sculpture of a white deer at Bailudong Academy.
ZHAO RUINAN / CHINA DAILY

“The academy is a unique educational institution that served as a place for the dissemination of culture, academic exchanges, and talent cultivation in ancient China.”

Yang Desheng, head of the academy's management committee

From page 1

Inside the institute, there is a small pavilion where students would hold discussions and study. The gap between the pavilion and the walls is very narrow, just wide enough for one person to pass through.

This passage served as a place for students to reflect on their mistakes. Wang and his parents passed through it and found it intriguing. “It's more fun here than I imagined. Our predecessors did not just sit in a classroom and study. Instead, many places here show me how they lived,” Wang said.

The oldest building in the academy is the Lingxing Gate, built in 1467, with Zhuangyuan Bridge situated behind it.

A Zhuangyuan was someone who ranked as first class in the palace examination, the highest level of the Chinese imperial examination.

Many visitors cross this bridge to seek good luck in their exams, according to tour guide Zuo Jingjing.

The history of the academy can be traced back to before 1467, to the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties.

In 785, scholar Li Bo and his brother Li She raised a clever white deer in seclusion, which fetched study materials for them, according to historical accounts. Years later, Li Bo, who became governor of Jiangzhou, named a valley after the deer to commemorate the brothers' hard work.

In 940, the valley's “kiosk” was transformed into a government-sponsored school, and by 1179 the academy had emerged as a regional center of learning.

Zhu Xi, one of the most influential Confucian scholars, then revitalized

the academy, turning it into a prominent educational institution that attracted notable scholars and produced outstanding graduates.

In those times, Bailudong Academy had a status equivalent to China's current top higher learning institutes, such as Tsinghua and Peking universities.

“The academy is a unique educational institution that served as a place for the dissemination of culture, academic exchanges, and talent cultivation in ancient China,” said Yang Desheng, head of the academy's management committee.

Southern strength

In addition to Bailudong, Jiangxi has had numerous other academies with well-established reputations.

During the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), there were 73 large government-sponsored academies nationwide, with 23 located in Jiangxi alone, according to the province's official records.

In the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), there were 417 academies nationwide, with about 100 in Jiangxi.

The well-developed academy system provided Jiangxi with a significant educational advantage, producing many Jinshi scholars (imperial scholars) during the Song and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties.

“At that time, Jiangxi was economically developed and densely populated and a large number of scholars naturally emerged. These scholars, nurtured in a strong academic atmosphere and with the developed academy system, excelled in the imperial examinations during the early Ming Dynasty,” said Fang Zhiyuan, a Ming history expert and a professor at Jiangxi Normal University.

According to the Ming Dynasty Jinshi List, over 3,000 Jinshi scholars from Jiangxi emerged during the Ming Dynasty, including 18 who achieved the top rank, the second highest amount nationwide after Zhejiang province.

Jinshi was the highest scholarly degree obtained through official examinations during the Ming and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, and an end point of a scholastic career and the start of becoming a government official.

The abundance of Jinshi graduates from Jiangxi even affected the Ming Dynasty's imperial examination system.

In the 30th year of the Hongwu period of the Ming Dynasty, all 51 candidates were from the southern regions, leading to protests from the northern examinees. Known as the “Southern List”, it included 18 from Jiangxi, accounting for over 30 percent of the total candidates.

In response to northern examinees' anger, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang decided to reorganize the examination and personally review the papers. As a result, 61 northern examinees were admitted, leading to what became known as the “Northern List”.

To prevent southern candidates from dominating the rankings, the central government subsequently began to segregate the admission of Jinshi scholars by region.

In addition to its educational contributions, Bailudong Academy also served as a venue for commu-

nication and exchanges between Chinese and Western cultures.

During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, with the initial wave of knowledge from Western countries sweeping across China, thousands of Catholic missionaries came to the country, including the renowned Italian Matteo Ricci.

In 1595, Ricci arrived in Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province, and resided there for three years. During this time, he had significant interactions with Zhang Huang, the headmaster of Bailudong Academy, and his students.

In his letters home, Ricci mentioned Bailudong Academy several times, noting how he introduced Christianity and its doctrines to the academy's teachers and students.

In a letter dated Nov 4, 1595, Ricci wrote: “I am pleased with the scholars at Bailudong Academy. They treated me very kindly, often debating with me on significant issues of life and the afterlife. ... The headmaster and I are good friends, and we often meet and talk with each other.”

Ricci also mentioned how he introduced Western disciplines like mathematics to the scholars and students in Nanchang, which garnered the interest and attention of the Bailudong Academy community.

In a letter dated Oct 28, 1595, he wrote: “The scholars and other literati at Bailudong Academy enjoy hearing me talk about mathematics. If I could settle here, I would like to introduce them to this field.”

Xiao Lang, a professor at the School of Education at Zhejiang University, wrote in a paper: “The historical exchanges between Ricci and Bailudong Academy represent a noteworthy chapter in ancient Chinese educational history, the history of academies, and the cultural and educational exchanges between East and West.”

Guo Hongda, the former deputy director of the administrative committee of Bailudong Academy, said: “Bailudong Academy has a long history of education and a profound influence. The set of school rules established by Zhu Xi at the academy has influenced subsequent centuries, serving as a model for later generations and spreading to Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia, earning Bailudong Academy a worldwide reputation.”

Building on legacy

In ancient times, academies served as spiritual homes for scholars. In the past decade or so, amid the revival of traditional Chinese culture, these academies, which have seen their share of ups and downs, have begun to thrive once more.

For instance, Bailudong Academy regularly hosts various activities, carrying on the cultural heritage.

It conducts educational activities in the ancient place, allowing students to experience Chinese calligraphy rubbings, pitching pots, painting fans, and archery in traditional Chinese classrooms, according to Guo.

Around 50,000 students like Wang visit Bailudong Academy for study trips each year.

In 2018, Bailudong Academy was awarded the title of National Primary and Secondary School Study Practice Education Base by the Ministry of Education.

“As a national cultural heritage

site, the 8,000-square-meter ruins of Bailudong Academy lack proper facilities for university teaching, research activities, and accommodations. Therefore, visitors could only tour the site in the past,” said Yang.

“But in the last two years, we have expanded the surrounding gardens of the academy, creating multiple tourist trails inside the institution, allowing people to experience the mindset of ancient scholars who ‘learned while traveling.’”

Recently, Lushan city reached an agreement for campus cooperation with Nanchang University and Jiujiang University. The two universities plan to collaborate with Bailudong Academy to revive the academy's educational tradition.

“On one hand, we will bring university courses to the academy. On the other hand, we are preparing for the construction of the Jiujiang College-Bailudong Academy campus. In the future, students from certain majors or colleges will be able to live and study at Bailudong Academy,” said Yang.

Bailudong Academy is also making efforts in promoting traditional Chinese culture globally.

Guo said that the academy regularly has exchanges of experts and scholars with foreign universities, who engage in cultural exchanges and learning.

“We also host international academic seminars, inviting scholars from different countries and regions for study and exchanges. Although Bailudong Academy no longer has a teaching function like in ancient times, academic and cultural exchanges and cooperation will continue.”



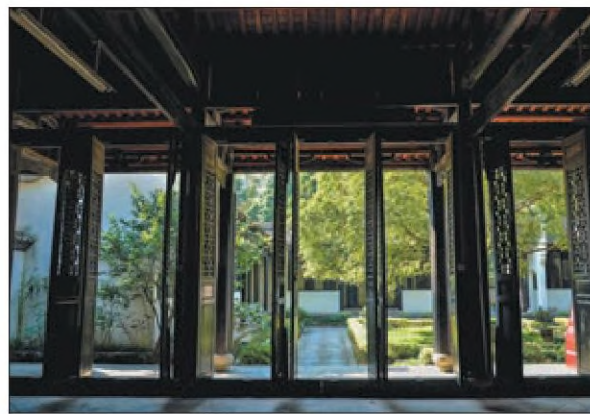
Tourists wearing ancient costumes visit Bailudong Academy on Jan 21.
ZHAO RUINAN / CHINA DAILY

“Although Bailudong Academy no longer has a teaching function like in ancient times, academic and cultural exchanges and cooperation will continue.”

Guo Hongda, former deputy director of the administrative committee of Bailudong Academy



Chinese media personnel from 18 countries and regions visit Bailudong Academy in October. LIU LIXIN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



A view of an interior part of Bailudong Academy.
DUAN CHANGZHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Students read books at Wenfeng Academy in Qianxi, Guizhou province in April. FAN HUI / XINHUA



Primary school students visit Bailudong Academy to learn traditional Chinese culture. XINHUA

TOP NEWS

Firms seek AI training with Chinese chips

Domestic alternatives will gradually reduce dependence on a single vendor, experts say

By MA SI
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The meteoric rise of DeepSeek, a Chinese private artificial intelligence startup, sheds light on a new way for Chinese AI chip companies to seek breakthroughs amid Washington's tougher tech restrictions to challenge the dominance of US semiconductor company Nvidia and reshape the global computing landscape, experts said on Monday.

Inside Highlighting that DeepSeek has developed a ChatGPT rival at a fraction of the reported cost of its US peers, they said its emergence shows that developing high-performance large language models does not require the exorbitant purchase of Nvidia's AI chips, and more Chinese chip alternatives can be used in the future.

The comments came after a string of Chinese tech companies, such as Huawei Technologies, said they had successfully adapted their products to support DeepSeek's large language model.

Yang Jian, chief technology officer of MetaX, a Shanghai-based chip company, said the training of DeepSeek's AI model has used graphics processing units, or GPUs, from Nvidia, but DeepSeek spent far less on Nvidia technology to develop its AI model than what US companies have spent.

Analysts at market consultancy Jefferies estimated that a recent version of DeepSeek's models had a training cost of only \$5.6 million, less than 10 percent of the cost of Meta's Llama.

Yang said that DeepSeek's practice shows that advanced AI programs can be designed with less expensive chips, sparking a new wave of optimism for Chinese semiconductor companies which are making progress.

Currently, Nvidia's GPU holds a 98 percent share of the global AI training market, Yang said. "But by the end of this year, some large language models will be trained on Chinese AI chips, with the trend becoming more apparent in 2026," he added.

"The Chinese market will gradually evolve," he said. "Nvidia will be one part of the computing

infrastructure and domestic chips will be another. Global computing power will become two parallel lines."

The recent adoption of DeepSeek by cloud providers such as SiliconFlow, using GPUs from Chinese companies such as Huawei and Moore Threads, showcases the growing confidence in domestic chips.

SiliconFlow said it has run DeepSeek on its cloud services supported by Huawei's Ascend AI chips, achieving performance comparable to AI services deployed on Nvidia's high-end GPUs.

Wang Hua, vice-president of AI and cloud computing at Moore Threads, said that based on its self-developed GPUs, the company can quickly deploy inference services of DeepSeek's AI models.

Pan Helin, a member of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology's Expert Committee for Information and Communication Economy, said DeepSeek has developed a new technical approach for large language models that saves on computing power. It could spur the wider use of domestic processors, as Washington bans the export of Nvidia's most advanced chips to China. "DeepSeek's success demonstrates a way to overcome the geopolitical barrier of US' tech bans, highlighting the importance of innovation and adaptability in achieving strategic goals," Pan added.

According to experts, Nvidia's GPUs have an edge in terms of their computing power and ecosystem maturity. As a result, AI models such as DeepSeek are unlikely to completely detach from Nvidia's ecosystem in the short term. However, in the long run, advancements in domestic alternatives, algorithmic optimization capabilities and increased industry emphasis on supply chain security will gradually reduce dependence on a single vendor.

"This process will take time and requires more domestic technological breakthroughs, but it is an irreversible trend. In the future, the global AI chip market will not be dominated by a single company," said Wang from Moore Threads.



Frozen waters

Ice sheets cover the surface of the Han River in Seoul, South Korea, on Monday as temperatures dip below freezing point in the capital. This year, the river froze about 30 days later than usual. YONHAP

Trump tariff plan to spur US inflation

By WANG KEJU
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US President Donald Trump said on Sunday that he will announce 25 percent tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports into the country on Monday, which analysts said will make it even harder for the White House to tame persistent inflation.

The ongoing trade war initiated by the United States shows no signs of abating and could escalate further, analysts said, adding that it will not help Washington achieve its goal of reshoring manufacturing and could backfire.

"Fighting inflation was one of Trump's campaign promises, but tariffs will only make inflation worse," said Yao Yang, director of the China Center for Economic Research at Peking University.

"High inflation under the Joe Biden administration was one of the key factors that sent Trump back to the White House. Trump needs to care about the reaction of his political base," Yao added.

"These tariffs will translate into higher input costs for a wide range of

industries that rely on steel and aluminum and those additional expenses will be passed on to consumers," said Zhou Mi, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation.

Moreover, the sweeping tariffs, Zhou noted, are likely to disrupt supply chains and undermine the competitiveness of US industries, and will further complicate the administration's ambitions to revitalize domestic manufacturing.

Trump did not think through the whole issue and announced the tariffs in a spontaneous manner, Yao said, adding that this was evident from his quick U-turn on Canada and Mexico. Another example was his turn on the de minimis for Chinese exports.

Trump signed an executive order on Friday that put a pause on imposing tariffs on small-value packages arriving from China, until the US Department of Commerce can ensure that "adequate systems are in place to fully and expeditiously process and collect tariff revenue."

On Feb 1, Trump suspended the de minimis trade exemption, a pro-

vision commonly used by Chinese e-commerce companies Temu and Shein to send goods worth less than \$800 into the US duty-free, as part of his administration's new tariff policies that include an additional 10 percent levy on all Chinese goods.

China swiftly responded with a 15 percent levy on US coal and liquefied natural gas and 10 percent on crude oil, farm equipment and a small number of trucks as well as big-engine sedans, effective Monday.

China's targeted goods represent about \$20 billion worth of annual imports — around 12 percent of China's total imports from the United States. This is a far cry from the more than \$450 billion worth of Chinese goods being targeted by the US, according to a report by Capital Economics, an economic research company headquartered in London.

In contrast to the broader and harsher measures taken during the first Trump administration, China's latest round of tariff hikes target a smaller range of US products and at lower rates, notably sparing the imposition of additional duties on major agricultural exports like soy-

bean and corn, said Cui Fan, a professor of international trade at the University of International Business and Economics.

China is the world's largest soybean consumer, with imports from the US accounting for around 21 percent of its total soybean supply, data from the General Administration of Customs showed.

By refraining from targeting these key agricultural commodities, China appears to be striking a delicate balance between defending its legitimate interests and minimizing the potential disruption to critical trade relationships, Cui added.

Should the US interpret China's actions as a signal of its willingness to find a negotiated solution, it may create an opportunity for both sides to engage in constructive dialogue and work toward a mutually acceptable resolution, Cui said.

"China's industrial structure is complementary to the United States" — the US is strong in high-tech industries, and China is strong in medium-range industries," Yao said, adding that "President Donald Trump is good at cutting deals. He will soon realize that welcoming Chinese investment is a much better deal than imposing tariffs on Chinese exports."

Ties: BRI projects help to build goodwill

From page 1

This serves as a useful tool to promote "Track 2 Diplomacy" — a type of informal diplomacy that involves nongovernmental, unofficial, and informal interactions — from the macro perspective, in addition to facilitating the progress of the projects on the ground with community support.

The rollout of corporate social responsibility programs, such as hosting of local festive celebrations and charity-centric handouts to the underprivileged by the Chinese SOEs means a great deal to the local community. The thoughtfulness of caring and sharing will certainly bolster people-to-people relations, thereby enriching the success stories of BRI.

The goodwill sown will ultimately pay off as it contributes to the building of positive perception of China in the host countries. In the multiparty electoral endeavors of Southeast Asia, projects or programs that have the people's support can hardly be exploited for adverse publicity during electioneering. On the contrary, any controversy or misgivings arising from the projects will certainly provide ideal fodder for electoral spin doctors.

Plainly put, when BRI projects become people-friendly in the local

social fabric, candidates of the contending parties would be left with no choice but to go along with the majority views in advocating the projects.

Over the years, many BRI projects across the world have witnessed flip-flop changes in the stance of host countries following the electoral changes-of-guard. This constitutes a cyclical political risk that China has to navigate in countries practicing multiparty parliamentary election. The best bet in navigating the risk obviously lies in the people at large.

This dimension is no less significant vis-a-vis the present emphasis on people-to-people connectivity through promoting both inbound and outbound tourism and mutual visits of officials between China and ASEAN countries. All these constitute the building of the China-ASEAN community with a shared future.

Key pillars

To usher in an era of a shared future for China and ASEAN, both parties have their mutual interests intertwined. Certainly, it is way beyond a ceremonial joint declaration by the state actors. Substantive milestones marking the escalation of China-ASEAN collaboration from the status of comprehensive strate-

gic partnership to one of a community with a shared future are needed to testify the trajectory.

In this context, China's proactiveness in leveraging the three key pillars of the ASEAN community, underscored in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and beyond, is well poised to catalyze the realization of the China-ASEAN community with a shared future. The three pillars of the vision, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community provide conducive platforms for China to foster more initiatives for China-ASEAN collaboration via the three global initiatives.

Alongside this, existing frameworks such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum provide additional windows of opportunity for China to strengthen security dialogues and cooperation with the region.

While traditional security collaboration may remain sensitive amid the rising geopolitical competition between China and the United States, collaboration in nontraditional security domains — including law enforcement security, emergency management, public health, food security, energy security and cybersecurity — could per-

haps provide a viable alternative for deepening the partnership.

In short, the China-ASEAN partnership is not short of collaborative initiatives at the inter-nations level. The real challenge lies in the synchronization and coordination between the officials at the working level.

By the same token, new flagship initiatives under the BRI framework, such as the China-ASEAN Institute of Modern Craftsmanship and the "Plan of Training for 10,000", are well intended for capacity building in vocational skill training in the respective partner countries, although impact of the program delivery rests much on the responsiveness of individual partner countries.

As the China-ASEAN partnership is steadily evolving and progressing with the changing regional dynamics and developmental needs, more new drivers for economic growth and elements for sociocultural engagement are emerging from time to time on the horizon.

Knowing that the endeavor is an arduous task, involving not only the state actors who dominate the "Track 1 Diplomacy", people-to-people connectivity involving the civil bodies across the individual ASEAN countries is therefore absolutely relevant and should be factored into the equation.

The author is president of the Belt and Road Initiative Caucus for Asia Pacific. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

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CHINA DAILY (ISSN 0748-6154) is published daily except weekends by China Daily USA, 1500 Broadway, Suite 2800, New York, NY 10036. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to CHINA DAILY USA, 1500 Broadway, Suite 2800, New York, NY 10036.

Vol. 38 — No. 1513

Green: Sino-African cooperation key to sustainable growth

From page 1

At the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation last year, Xi said: "China and Africa account for one-third of the world population. Without our modernization, there will be no global modernization."

Emphasizing that green development is a hallmark of modernization in the new era, Xi called on China and Africa to jointly advance eco-friendly modernization.

At the summit, China announced a raft of measures, including launching 30 clean energy projects in Africa, putting in place meteorological

early warning systems, and carrying out cooperation in disaster prevention, mitigation and relief, as well as promoting biodiversity conservation in the next three years.

Cliff Mboya, a research fellow at the Ghana-based Afro-Sino Centre of International Relations, told German media Deutsche Welle that Africa's long-term development plans are being taken into consideration, and that "we are seeing China aligning with the Agenda 2063 proposed by the African Union."

Paul Melly, an Africa analyst, told the British Broadcasting Corp that "Beijing now has ambitions to become

a key partner for the continent in new high-tech industry and green technology on a scale that many European and North American companies are unwilling or unable to contemplate."

He noted that the Beijing summit highlighted the green energy transition, including investment in manufacturing in Africa, particularly that of electric vehicles. This is of great significance for a continent that has lagged far behind Asia in developing sophisticated industries, he added.

Li Wentao, a researcher at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, said, "China has unique advantages and rich experi-

ence, while Africa has great needs in energy transformation, strengths in areas such as natural resources, and great room for development.

"The two sides enjoy complementary advantages in Africa's green transformation. Their cooperation is not only mutually beneficial, but also essential for a common sustainable future," Li added.

By drawing experience from China's Three-North Shelterbelt Forest Program, the African Union launched the Great Green Wall Initiative in 2007 to restore the continent's degraded landscapes and transform millions of lives in the Sahel, the semiarid region

of western and north-central Africa.

Erik Solheim, vice-president of the Green Belt and Road Coalition and former executive director of the UN Environment Programme, said on social media that China is an indispensable nation for the world's green shift. "The color of the Belt and Road is now green. There are huge investments in green railways, ports and bridges — in solar farms, wind and hydro projects."

China also supports Africa in addressing climate-related injustice and is strengthening coordination with African countries on climate change issues.

Although Africa accounts for a very low proportion of global carbon emissions, it has become one of the regions most severely affected by cli-

mate change, said Li, the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations researcher.

"Developed countries should shoulder more historical responsibilities, provide financial and technical support to help Africa cope with climate change, and give the continent fair development space. This is not only the core issue of global climate governance, but also key to achieving sustainable development," Li said.

Official data show that China has signed 53 cooperation documents with 42 developing countries, trained more than 2,500 professionals in the field of climate change response, and provided assistance to countries to tackle climate change.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

CHINA

Ryukyu islanders have ancestors from Shandong

By YAN DONGJIE
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Through nuclear genome research, Chinese scientists have recently discovered that people from the Ryukyu Islands have ancestral roots in Shandong province.

The research team led by Fu Qiaomei from the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with scientists from Shandong, analyzed the nuclear genome data of the population in Shandong from 6,000 years ago.

The team concluded that about 1,500 years ago, people from what is now Shandong passed down genetic traits to the people of the Ryukyu Islands.

On Feb 3, Nature Communications published online the research results titled "East Asian gene flow bridged by northern coastal populations over the past 6,000 years", a collaborative effort between Fu's team, Shandong University's Institute of Cultural Heritage, the Shandong Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, and the Jinan Archaeological Institute, focusing on the systematic nuclear genome research of people from the Shandong region dating back approximately 6,000 to 1,500 years.

The study systematically depicts communication among inland-coastal-island populations in East Asia over the past 6,000 years, using Shandong as a bridge on an east-west scale based on ancient genomic data, Fu said.

"The genetic history of the northern inland-coastal-island populations has always been one of the most important research topics in East Asia," Fu said.

The study reconstructed and

analyzed the nuclear genomes of 85 individuals from 11 sites in the Shandong region, marking the first systematic study of ancient human genomes based on the east-west scale of northern inland-northern coastal-island regions.

"This reveals the dynamic migration, evolution and mixing history of populations in the northern coastal and surrounding areas of East Asia since the late Neolithic period over a long time span and a wide geographic range," Fu said.

She noted that extensive research indicates that coastal areas were important channels for ancient population migration and exchange, and the northern coastline served as a crucial channel for the spread of crops and trade goods from the East Asian mainland to the Ryukyu Islands.

Thousands of years ago, populations in coastal areas were able to undertake long-distance migrations by sea, spreading their influence to many islands, fostering genetic and cultural exchanges between different populations.

"However, the history of cross-sea migration and exchange of populations in the northern coastal regions of East Asia is not yet fully understood," Fu said.

"The connection between populations in the northern coastal regions of East Asia and ancient populations in the Ryukyu Islands remains unclear."

The study, focusing on the ancient populations in the northern coastal regions of East Asia and radiating their surrounding northern inland and island populations, marks the first systematic nuclear genome research with a long time span and wide geographical range, updating and filling in previous controversies and related model hypotheses, the institute said.

New housing perks draw talent to Zhuhai

By CHAI HUA
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More than 1,000 professionals from about 400 companies have applied for incentives under Zhuhai's new housing policy since its launch on Feb 6, the southern Guangdong city's organization department said Monday.

The policy offers young professionals who began working in Zhuhai after June 1, 2023, free housing for their first year, a 70 percent rent reduction in the second year and a 50 percent discount in the third year.

"We're striving to establish one of the nation's most favorable and comprehensive housing systems for young professionals," said Li Tengdong, a senior official with the Zhuhai Municipal Party Committee's Organization Department.

Li said the program is designed to be inclusive, extending beyond those with undergraduate or higher degrees to skilled workers and experts with specialized expertise. The city aims to attract talent beyond traditional educational qualifications.

Permanent residents of Hong

Kong and Macao, as well as those approved under Hong Kong's Quality Migrant Admission Scheme and Macao's High-end and Outstanding Talent Recruitment System, are also eligible for the benefits.

A WeChat mini program platform has been accepting applications since the policy's launch. The organization department said local businesses have responded positively to the initiative.

The first batch of 1,000 apartments is expected to be available by the end of the month. Up to 7,000 units are scheduled for release this year, with 36,000 planned over the next three years.

"The new policy offers tangible support for newly hired graduates, greatly enhancing companies' ability to attract talent," said Fang Haizhou, managing director of Zhuhai-based Essex Bio-Technology.

Many companies in Guangdong already offer housing incentives to attract professionals. Xiao Yibo, founder and CEO of Zhuhai-based biotechnology startup Protoga, said the housing perks help companies lower labor costs, allowing them to invest more in technological research and innovation.

Conservation boosts bird protection

LANZHOU — For Gao Feng, a shutterbug and bird lover, setting forth on a journey to wetlands and taking snapshots of migratory birds in such locations serves as a treat in his golden years.

The 62-year-old has captured more than 100,000 images of nearly 300 bird species over the past four years in the wetlands, forests, rivers and lakes in Gansu province.

"I love photographing birds in wetlands. The diversity and size of waterfowl always delivers surprises," Gao said. His lens has recorded rare moments of crested ibises dancing and Chinese mergansers gliding across the water.

Gansu has wetlands covering nearly 1.19 million hectares. In recent years, creative and scientific conservation efforts have transformed these areas into thriving

sanctuaries for migratory birds.

Located at the northeast edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Gaha-Zecha National Nature Reserve attracts flocks of migratory birds in June and November every year to reproduce and spend their winter here.

Fan Long, an official with the reserve administration, said that 40 artificial nests and infrared cameras have been set up on the center island to facilitate foraging, breeding and nesting.

"The utilization rate of these artificial nests has reached 99 percent," Fan said. "The nests not only provide safe feeding grounds, but also protect the birds from predators."

Notably, this reserve is a crucial breeding site for the black-necked crane — the only crane species that breeds and lives on plateaus.

Festival begins



A woman spins a prayer wheel as Buddhist believers and tourists admire a giant thangka in celebration of the Shoton Festival, or Yogurt Festival, at Langmu Temple in Gannan Tibetan autonomous prefecture, Gansu province, on Monday. Monks carried the enormous rolled-up thangka painting of Buddha and then spread it on a platform on the hillside for sunning, signaling the start of the festival.

ZHANG TIELIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

ASEAN visa waiver scheme announced

Tour groups from all member nations can easily visit Xishuangbanna region

By WANG QINGYUN
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China on Monday announced a visa-free policy for tour groups from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations who want to visit Xishuangbanna Dai autonomous prefecture, Yunnan province, in the latest step to boost people-to-people exchanges with Southeast Asia.

Now, such tour groups made up of at least two ordinary passport holders from any of the 10 ASEAN member countries can enter and leave China without a visa through the Xishuangbanna Gasa International Airport, the Mohan Railway Port and the Mohan Highway Port, which are all located in the prefecture, the National Immigration Administration said.

After entry through any of the three ports, the tour groups from most of the ASEAN member coun-

tries are allowed to stay in Xishuangbanna for up to six days, the NIA said, emphasizing that the groups must be organized and received by travel agencies in China.

Exceptions are made for visitors from ASEAN member countries that fall under China's visa waiver scheme. Ordinary passport holders from ASEAN members Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand are allowed to enter China without a visa and stay in the country for up to 30 days.

The NIA quoted one of its officials as saying the new policy aiming to attract more tourists to Xishuangbanna "marks a significant step toward ... supporting Yunnan in becoming a center with radiation effects for South and Southeast Asia".

The policy will also serve to promote the development of the tourism industry in Southwest China, enhance people-to-people

exchanges between China and other countries, and deepen the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and ASEAN, the official said.

The NIA said it will come up with more policies to attract more foreigners to travel and do business in China, and inject new momentum into the inbound travel market.

Known for its tropical scenery, Xishuangbanna is located in the southernmost tip of Yunnan. The province, which borders Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, is one of China's gateways to Southeast Asia.

In 2024, border inspection authorities in Yunnan recorded more than 24.76 million cross-border passenger trips, a 64.5 percent year-on-year increase, the province's general station of exit and entry border inspection said.

During the year, Xishuangbanna attracted more than 70 million tourists from both China and abroad, up 13.44 percent year-on-year, the prefecture's publicity department said.



Safety first

A worker clears ice from equipment at an offshore oil production base of the Shengli Oilfield in Dongying, Shandong province, on Sunday, to ensure the safety of the oil production process. Influenced by strong, cold air, recent temperatures around the province have fallen to as low as -10 C. ZHANG CAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

New drug for type 2 diabetes to be offered

By ZHOU WENTING
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Innogen, a Shanghai-based medical technology company, announced that its independently developed, human-derived, ultra-long-acting GLP-1 injection has been approved for market by China's National Medical Products Administration for the treatment of type 2 diabetes in adults.

The once-weekly injection — expected to be prescribed at a hospital in Shanghai starting next week — lowers blood sugar levels and improves metabolic function in diabetic patients.

Ongoing clinical trials have also shown promising weight-loss effects, the company said on Saturday.

The approval makes Innogen the first company in Asia and the third globally to hold independent intellectual property rights for a human-derived, long-acting GLP-1 receptor agonist against diabetes. The company is positioning the drug as a competitor to imported treatments such as Novo Nordisk's semaglutide and Eli Lilly's tirzepatide.

Globally, there are at least 10 GLP-1 drugs for type 2 diabetes on the market. Of them, only three are human-derived and ultra-long-acting injections, including one from Eli Lilly and two from Novo Nordisk.

"Our innovative injection boasts an average half-life of up to 204 hours in the human body, making it the longest-lasting GLP-1 drug on the global market," said Wang Qinghua, founder and CEO of Innogen.

"With this homegrown medicine, healthcare workers will be better equipped to help type 2 diabetes patients manage their blood sugar and weight, ushering in a new era of metabolic health," said Jia Weiping, an academician with the Chinese Academy of Engineering and a professor at Shanghai Sixth People's Hospital Affiliated with Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine.

The first prescription of the newly approved drug is expected at the hospital this week.

China has the world's largest diabetes population, with an estimated 148 million adult patients. More than 60 percent are overweight or obese. According to national figures released in 2020, 34.3 percent of Chinese adults were overweight, while 16.4 percent were obese, increasing their risk of conditions such as diabetes and hypertension.

Medical experts explain that GLP-1 is a hormone produced in the gut that signals satiety to the brain, delaying gastric emptying and reducing hunger. It also helps decrease visceral fat and improve the fat-burning effect of exercise. GLP-1 drugs raise the concentration of active GLP-1 in the bloodstream, promoting appetite control and fat reduction.

Originally developed for type 2 diabetes, GLP-1 therapies have gained global popularity for their weight-loss benefits. In China, four GLP-1 drugs — two imported and two domestic — have been approved for weight management.

British bank Barclays projects the global weight-loss therapy market will reach \$150 billion by 2030. US consultancy Frost & Sullivan forecasts China's GLP-1 market will exceed 50 billion yuan (\$6.84 billion) by then.

Wang, who has researched GLP-1 receptor agonists for over two decades, said clinical trial data showed that in non-diabetic individuals, four weeks of use resulted in an average weight loss of 4 kilograms, a 6.2 percent reduction. About 71 percent of participants lost more than 5 percent of their body weight.

Innogen plans to launch a phase II clinical trial for type 2 diabetes in Australia and a phase I study for non-alcoholic fatty liver disease in the United States.

XINHUA

CHINA

CROSSING THE STRAIT

Editor's Note: The Taiwan question is a key focus for China and the international community. China Daily is publishing a series of reports to track hot Taiwan-related topics and address disinformation from the Democratic Progressive Party administration.



Shared culture, history remain strong bonds for Chinese compatriots

People watch a lantern parade depicting Zheng He, who headed a large fleet multiple times to Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa during the early 15th century, during the 23rd edition of the Mawei-Matsu Lantern Festival on Saturday in Mawei district of Fuzhou, Fujian province. WANG DONGMING / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

By ZHANG YI
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It's a tradition for Chinese people to hang up lanterns on the 15th day of the first month of Chinese New Year, which marks the first full moon of the year, giving rise to the Lantern Festival. This festival, which falls on Wednesday this year, symbolizes reunion and signals the end of Spring Festival celebrations.

In the southeastern coastal regions of Fujian province and neighboring Taiwan, there exist unique yet similar lantern customs, showcasing the enduring cultural and genetic connections across the Taiwan Strait.

The areas of Mawei in Fuzhou, Fujian, and Matsu, an island off the mainland coast managed by Taiwan, share deep roots. For generations, people from both places have exchanged lanterns during Spring Festival and jointly held Lantern Festival events, a practice that has become the first national intangible cultural heritage bridging both sides of the Strait.

On Saturday night, a group of Taiwan compatriots traveled from Matsu to enjoy the show in Fuzhou. The 23rd edition of the Mawei-Matsu Lantern Festival, which kicked off on Jan 9, will run for a record 53 days.

"The two sides are one family and Fujian and Taiwan enjoy even closer bonds," Guo Ningning, secretary of the Communist Party of China Fuzhou Committee, said while meeting the group, adding that the event plays a significant role in connecting the two sides.

A 9-meter-tall lantern depicting Mazu, a sea goddess originating from Putian, Fujian, has become a popular spot for visitors to take photos. The belief in Mazu, known for safeguarding those who venture out to sea, was brought to Taiwan by people from Fujian.

Cai Lihua, secretary-general of the Institute of Fujian and Taiwan History and Cultural Research, said around 80 percent of Taiwan's population have ancestors who'd moved from Fujian, and these people, longing for their homeland, often named their villages or roads after places in their hometowns on the mainland.

There are two coastal areas named Dongshi on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, one in Jinjiang, Fujian, and the other in Chiayi, Taiwan. During the late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, a large number of people from Dongshi in Fujian moved to Taiwan.

These migrants not only named their new settlement in Taiwan "Dongshi" but also retained the unique tradition of hanging and counting lanterns at the local temple. Newlyweds from the previous year hang lanterns brought as part of the bride's dowry on the 13th day of the first month in the Chinese calendar at the temple, praying for a happy marriage and children.

The family members of many who moved to Taiwan often return to Dongshi in Fujian to hang lanterns to pay respects to their ancestors and then take back the temple lanterns from their homeland.

"The shared custom of counting lanterns illustrates that compatriots on both sides of the Strait are family members, with a shared culture, roots and heritage," Cai said.

Cross-Strait celebrations

During Spring Festival for the Year of the Snake, the first Spring Festival since the annual celebration was added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in December, compatriots from both sides of the Taiwan Strait celebrated in similar ways.

A joint fireworks display lit up the night sky on Jan 29, the first day of the



Some 30 Taiwan members of an exchange group of young baseball and softball players learn about Fuzhou-style jasmine tea making during a break from competition in Fuzhou, Fujian province, on Friday. LYU MING / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Chinese New Year on beaches in Xiamen of Fujian, and Jinmen, a nearby island administered by Taiwan, as both sides celebrated the festival.

Starting at 8 pm, nearly 50,000 fireworks were set off from both beaches. The 30-minute display featured elements that highlighted cross-Strait ties.

In Jinan, Shandong province, and Taipei, networks have been established to exchange greetings during the festival. In Suzhou, Jiangsu province, over 60 members of cross-Strait marriage families gathered to enjoy Taiwan hotpot this year.

Making dumplings, hanging Spring Festival couplets and exchanging red envelopes are common traditions observed during Chinese New Year on both sides.

An Wei-lun, from Taiwan and currently a senior student at Peking University, plans to pursue postgraduate studies in Beijing. This winter break, he returned to Taiwan to spend Chinese New Year's Eve with his family.

"We celebrate Chinese New Year

in a similar manner. Essentially, it's all about family reunion," he said. "Reuniting with relatives is a very important custom that should be preserved."

On Chinese New Year's Eve, similar to the mainland, those skilled in cooking make dumplings at home, and there are also ancestral commemoration rituals. An's grandfather, originally from Shandong province, moved to Taiwan in 1949. The grandfather still speaks with a Shandong accent and enjoys scallions just as the local people in Shandong, hence the family's preference for Shandong-style cuisine.

Chang Ya-en, from New Taipei City, Taiwan, said that on New Year's Eve, her family prepares the family reunion meal together, with braised fish being a must-have dish. They also place large oranges and Wendan pomelos on a table for worship, praying for peace and prosperity, a practice popular in southern Fujian as well.

Chen Chung-hsien, who was born in Taiwan but has lived in Vietnam

since childhood, said people across the Taiwan Strait share the same culture, leading to similar customs.

"We have the tradition of putting up Spring Festival couplets. Visiting relatives and receiving red envelopes are the most anticipated aspects," he said, adding that these customs are commonly observed among the overseas Chinese in Vietnam.

Zhu Fenglian, spokeswoman for the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, said Spring Festival is a time to bid farewell to the old, welcome the new and celebrate family reunions. People on both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to the Chinese nation, sharing a deep understanding of the values of peace and harmony embodied in the festival, she added.

Song Tao, head of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, extended festive greetings to the Taiwan business community ahead of Spring Festival. He visited Taiwan enterprises and participated in cross-Strait exchange events with nearly 400 Taiwan businesspeople and compatriots in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, and Xiamen from Jan 21 to 23.

Song learned about the business operations and development of Taiwan enterprises and listened to their opinions and suggestions. He emphasized that the mainland will continue to refine policies and mechanisms to promote cross-Strait economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation.

The shared values of peace, harmony and the pursuit of a better life among people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait remain the foundation of the development of cross-Strait relations, he said.



Watch the video by scanning the code.

Shared festival customs in Fujian, Taiwan

Tomb Sweeping Day

People clean ancestors' graves, remove weeds, burn incense, offer sacrificial cakes, repaint inscriptions on tombstones and make spring rolls filled with chicken, egg, tofu, shrimp, peanuts, seaweed and mushrooms. Parents tell their children about the birthplaces of their ancestors in Fujian and their achievements in developing the island of Taiwan. Many Taiwan residents return to Fujian for tomb-sweeping, and those unable to go back perform ancestor worship by the sea. Clan members gather at ancestral temples for family rituals, including feasts and activities to strengthen family bonds.

Dragon Boat Festival

People eat glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves. There are two main types: plain glutinous rice without fillings and meat ones filled with pork, mushrooms and dried shrimp. As the weather heats up around that time (in late May or early June) and mosquitoes become more abundant, people in both places hang mugwort on their doors to reduce insects. Dragon boat races are held in both Fujian and Taiwan.

Hungry Ghost Festival

Observed on the 15th day of the seventh month of the Chinese calendar, it involves appeasing spirits. Offerings, burning ghost money, setting up altars and lighting bamboo pole lamps are common practices. The tradition was brought to Taiwan by Fujian people, where the festival is even more elaborate due to the hardships and deaths faced by the early settlers, leading to a strong reverence for spirits. Those early settlers who died far from home in Taiwan are commemorated by the living who cared for each other like brothers in the early period, so the event is also known as remembering "Good Brothers" in Taiwan.

Mid-Autumn Festival

Families gather to admire the full moon, eat mooncakes and play dice games. The tradition of mooncake gambling in southern Fujian is also popular in Taiwan. This game originated about 300 years ago when soldiers, led by General Zheng Chenggong from Fujian to recover the land of Taiwan from Dutch occupation, yearned for their families during the festival. To boost morale, they organized mooncake gambling activities, emphasizing patriotism and victory. Additionally, taro, symbolizing familial bonds, is prepared in various dishes.

SOURCE: CHINA MUSEUM FOR FUJIAN-TAIWAN KINSHIP

ZHANG YI

Female cross-talkers preserve comedic art form

By ZHANG YI and WANG JING

Ji Tian-yu, an actress from Taiwan, retold the tragic romance of *Legend of the White Snake*, one of China's four great romance legends, through a comedic performance at a Spring Festival gala celebrating the Year of the Snake recently.

Ji, along with Sun Yue from Beijing and Soo Wee Seng from Malaysia, performed cross-talk, or *xiangsheng*, a Chinese stand-up comedy genre involving humorous conversations, which captivated the audience at a Spring Festival event hosted by China Media Group and broadcast on the first day of the Chinese New Year.

The story of a female snake spirit and a mortal falling in love but ultimately having to part ways, leaving countless viewers with regret, was given a happy ending in the trio's humorous cross-talk. The program was titled *A Few More Times In a Thousand Years*, symbolizing the wish for the two lovers to meet more often.

"We hope on the day of reunion, the lovers' meeting won't be once in

a thousand years, but rather, the two can be together," said Ji, who also wrote the script.

It was inspired by the poignant love story that makes the audience appreciate snakes, rather than typically fearing them, she said. "The White Snake is kind, compassionate, pursues love faithfully, and in the story, we often see her protecting her husband."

Ji said she hopes to share with the world the virtues cherished by Chinese people, including loyalty, filial piety, chastity and righteousness as depicted in the folklore.

Having a natural talent for performance and comedy from the time she was young, Ji developed an interest in cross-talk while listening to performances with her grandfather who moved to Taiwan in 1949 from his hometown Shandong province.

"It's easy to make someone cry. Give him a slap and he'll cry, but making someone laugh is much harder." The comedic aspect of cross-talk attracted her to study the art form.

She became the only third-generation apprentice of the clan of Wu

Zhao-nan, who grew up in Beijing, and who brought cross-talk from the mainland to Taiwan in 1949. He later established the first Chinese cross-talk club in the United States and returned to the mainland to further promote the art form.

Her master, Liu Tseng-kai, who ran a cross-talk teahouse in Taiwan and taught many apprentices, was the first Taiwan cross-talk performer to appear on China Central Television's Spring Festival Gala in 2006.

The emphasis on heritage within this master-disciple lineage and the stories of her predecessors gradually led Ji to realize that creating cross-Strait connections through the art form had become a mission for her.

In recent years, Ji has participated in numerous performances and cross-talk competitions on the mainland, becoming familiar and beloved by audiences not only because she is from Taiwan but also because female performers are rare in this industry.

She later founded an all-female cross-talk group from Taiwan, presenting scripts suitable for female

audiences, including content based on historical female figures, aiming to promote gender equality and attract a younger audience.

When Ji brought the young female cross-talk performers to the mainland for exchanges, people were curious upon hearing about an all-female cross-talk group.

One member, An Chen-chu, was deeply impressed by a cross-talk performance by Ji and her master Liu that she saw on a TV program as a child. After graduating from college, she sent them letters expressing her desire to learn from them.

In recent years, An has participated in several cross-Strait young actor exchange activities with Ji, performing in Sichuan province, Tianjin, and visiting mainland schools to learn the art training system.

"The first time I stepped onto the stage, my hands were trembling with nervousness, but she made me feel at ease," she said, adding that in the future, she hopes to incorporate more creativity into cross-talk.

Ji also recalls taking young actors



Ji Tian-yu (left) from Taiwan, along with Sun Yue (center) from Beijing and Soo Wee Seng from Malaysia, perform cross-talk, or *xiangsheng*, during a Spring Festival event hosted by China Media Group. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

from Taiwan to perform at a teahouse in Tianjin, the birthplace of cross-talk. They were nervous and even cried off-stage, reminding her of her own experiences performing in Tianjin when she was young. Such experiences have contributed to her growth.

In the future, Ji hopes to establish a cross-Strait cross-talk exchange center to help more young learners. She is also working on producing a TV series, telling the story of her

grand master's legendary life in promoting the art form.

Contact the writers at
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Watch the video by scanning the code.

CHINA



From left: An Wan's Qinqiang Opera troupe stages a performance in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. An thanks the audience after a performance. PHOTOS BY PEI QIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Finnish man settles in Suzhou, calls it home

NANJING — “*Xin chun kuai le!*” Zekrollah Aflatuni, 80, said as he gave a toast for a happy Spring Festival in fluent Chinese, clinking glasses with his guests at a table laden with holiday dishes and delights.

It was the eve of the 27th Spring Festival that this silver-haired Iranian-Finnish man has celebrated since he arrived in Suzhou, Jiangsu province. “I come from Finland, the hometown of Santa Claus,” Aflatuni said joyfully. “For me, besides Christmas, Spring Festival is another grand event every year for family gatherings and happiness.

“Dumplings are a must-have. We’re also having *niangao*,” he added, referring to a type of glutinous rice cake often eaten during Spring Festival.

On Jan 28, Aflatuni celebrated the eve of Spring Festival with his wife and some of the Chinese staff of Finland Home Cafe, his cozy eatery tucked away on Pingjiang Road — a historical and cultural block in the heart of Suzhou’s well-preserved old town. “My wife and I chose to open the cafe here because we wanted to immerse ourselves in the very essence of Suzhou culture,” Aflatuni said. “Walking down Pingjiang Road, you can feel the 2,500-year history of this charming water town.”

Suzhou, dubbed “Venice in the East” by 13th-century Venetian explorer Marco Polo, is celebrated not only for the beauty of its winding canals, elegant bridges and classical gardens — but also for its rich cultural heritage, which includes *pingtan*, the city’s distinctive style of ballad.

Calling himself “a Suzhou local,” Aflatuni has even learned to sing *pingtan* songs in the Suzhou dialect. This year, he performed at the local Spring Festival gala, blending the graceful art of *pingtan* with the rhythms of an Iranian drum.

Watching fireworks during Spring Festival is another item on the must-do list for Aflatuni. He still remembers the dazzling fireworks display on the eve of the festival in 1999. The sky was alive with color for hours, a spectacle that left him mesmerized.

That was his first Spring Festival in China, after he had assumed the post of deputy general manager of Finnish multinational Nokia’s Suzhou branch.

“The branch was located in the Suzhou Industrial Park on the outskirts of the city. When we first got there, it was mostly paddy fields and fish ponds,” Aflatuni said. “Over the years, the SIP has blossomed into a remarkable industrial hub.”

As China’s first intergovernmental cooperation project with Singapore, the SIP symbolizes the country’s reform and opening-up, while also reflecting its rapid modernization and the development of an open economy, according to Duan Jinjun, a professor at the Business School of Soochow University.

“The city’s blend of ancient traditions and modern innovation makes it ideal for foreign visitors eager to immerse themselves in Spring Festival, offering a glimpse of both traditional and contemporary China,” Duan said.

Thanks to a 240-hour visa-free transit policy, many international travelers packed their bags and headed to China to soak up the festive atmosphere.

Suzhou, a popular destination, was well prepared to welcome visitors with over 1,100 festive activities on offer in the course of the eight-day holiday period, local culture and tourism authorities reported.

Minnie Ang, a Singaporean living in Suzhou, said that she has friends from Australia, Singapore and Switzerland who celebrated this year’s Spring Festival in the city.

Ang’s parents moved to the SIP in 2008 to establish Orientech Fine Blanking, a manufacturing company in the automotive industry. Five years ago, she joined the company and has since made Suzhou her second home. “Suzhou has a way of pulling you in,” Ang said, reflecting on how deeply the city has impacted her life, and on how the SIP reminds her of Singapore.

According to official data, Suzhou is home to around 30,000 foreign nationals, ranking first in Jiangsu.

XINHUA

XINHUA

Ancient opera shows with modern twist sell out across Northwest China

Livestreams of the Qinqiang performances in December attracted 140 million views

By MA JINGNA in Lanzhou and ZHAO RUINAN

It’s hard to fathom that more than 2,000 years after Qinqiang Opera was ever performed in China, that social media and technology would be driving its continued popularity, especially in the northwest of the country.

Driven by 1.27 million followers on Chinese social media platform Kuaishou, 47-year-old Qinqiang Opera performer An Wan and his 158-member troupe, completed a sold-out tour in December across Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, and the Ningxia Hui autonomous region.

Playing in countless venues across Northwest China, audience numbers averaged around 300 to 500 people in rural areas, and as many as 10,000 in big cities such as in Lanzhou, Gansu province.

The livestreamed shows on this latest tour have been viewed more than 140 million times.

What has propelled their success has been the use of short-video platforms, dating back to 2016, which has enabled them to grow a fan base for the traditional performance art online, as well as the introduction of modern elements into the live shows.

Traditionally, Qinqiang Opera originated from local folk songs and dance forms in Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. According to historical records, the opera first appeared in the Qin Dynasty (221-206BC) and remained popular in



Audiences enjoy a Qinqiang Opera show by An Wan’s troupe in Xi’an.

the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Its stories feature such themes as war, the fight between the loyal and the treacherous, and the struggle against oppression.

A key element of this opera style is its joyous and sad tunes, whereby the audience joins in to create a powerful atmosphere.

“Since the latest performances in Xi’an, I’ve gained nearly 300,000 new fans online, mostly from people in their 20s and 30s. I’m thrilled that so many young people are now interested in Qinqiang Opera,” An said.

Like other traditional opera arts, Qinqiang Opera has long faced various challenges brought on by changing times.

In a 2014 report in Chinese Culture Daily, Liu Kuanren, then director of the Shaanxi provincial department of culture, said: “Although every county in Shaanxi has its own Qinqiang Opera troupe, one-third of them are actually defunct. Many actors struggle to make a living, and the situation of local opera troupes is concerning.”

He also noted that there are many issues to consider for the inheritance and development of Qinqiang Opera.

Echoing Liu, An said: “There are over 3,000 Qinqiang Opera repertoires, but due to various reasons, only a few dozen are widely circulated. Without protection and proper transmission, many repertoires

are at risk of being lost.”

As an experienced Qinqiang actor who has dedicated himself to the art form since he was 12, An has played his part in revitalizing the show.

“Qinqiang Opera has been lukewarm for many for a long time. The main reason is that we’ve been following the same path, merely tracing the footsteps of our predecessors without innovations. So I thought, why not shake things up a bit,” he said.

An and his troupe preserved the essence of classic plays while adjusting melodies and rhythms, such as slowing the pace of recitation and reducing some dialect elements. At the same time, the troupe incorporated effects from Western-style concerts, introducing elements such as smoke, snow and fire machines to create a more vibrant setting.

They expanded their orchestra to 40 members, incorporating Western music and rock elements to blend the ancient Qinqiang style with modern artistic expressions.

“We even considered adding elements like rap and DJs that young people like, allowing them to feel the rhythm on stage,” he said.

“Many young people in the audience are now excited. They find the music beautiful,” he added.

The troupe’s young actors also support this transformation of embracing the younger generation.

Bai Mengmeng, an 18-year-old said, “We must uphold traditional culture but also innovate to cater to young people’s needs, because the

present era belongs to the youth.”

The livestreams have been crucial to getting a younger following from the beginning, An said, adding that during the streams he’d explain Qinqiang techniques, share stories about the art form and highlight the unique charm of the opera.

“As my fan base grew, I formed my own hundred-member troupe and started livestreaming performances,” he said.

An’s success has been remarkable, with sellout performances wherever the troupe goes.

Wang Peng, a 13-year-old fan from Hubei province said: “I love Qinqiang Opera very much and also admire An Wan. He is a brilliant actor and can convey his inner feelings and emotions through singing, helping young people better understand the art and continue its legacy.”

Data released by Kuaishou shows a rising interest in Qinqiang Opera.

In December, views on the platform related to Qinqiang increased by 65 percent compared to the previous year and by 46 percent compared to June.

He Xiaozu, head of the Gansu Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, said, “It is not easy for private troupes to achieve what they have today within a year.

“Preserving the original flavor of Qinqiang, rediscovering lost plays and cultural traditions, and organizing nearly lost scripts is crucial.”

Contact the writers at zhaorutinan@chinadaily.com.cn

Sculptor keeps cultural heritage in safe hands

TIANJIN — In a studio adorned with antique charm in Tianjin municipality, Zhang Yu delicately rotated a clay sculpture with his left hand while skillfully carving intricate details with a tool in his right.

Gradually, a “Lucky Star” figure took shape, its face beaming with kindness and joy, while its flowing robes added a sense of movement.

“The Lucky Star held a big gold ingot in his right hand and a *ruyi*, a symbol of good luck, in his left hand, which means joy and auspiciousness in Chinese culture. It perfectly fits the festive and peaceful atmosphere of Spring Festival,” said Zhang, a sixth-generation inheritor of Clay Figure Zhang, a renowned form of intangible cultural heritage in China.

To celebrate Spring Festival in the Year of the Snake, 59 “Lucky Star” clay figures were released on Feb 1, the fourth day of the Chinese New Year.

Clay Figure Zhang is a household name in traditional folk art in China, and such artwork has a history of nearly 200 years. It was listed in 2006 in the first batch of China’s national intangible cultural heritage.



Zhang Yu works on a “Lucky Star” clay figurine in his workshop in Tianjin on Jan 20. SUN FANYUE / XINHUA

The craft’s essence lies in its traditional techniques.

“The clay used for the Lucky Star sculptures is stored in a cellar for three years before being sculpted. Completing a single piece takes over three months and involves multiple intricate steps, such as shaping, air-drying, firing, polishing and painting,” Zhang said.

“No matter how the themes and styles evolve, we remain committed

to excellence in clay sculpture craftsmanship and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage,” he added.

On Ancient Culture Street, Tianjin’s oldest hub for folk culture and commerce, the red-and-gold signboard of Clay Figure Zhang’s shop stands out, drawing visitors inside.

Stepping into the elegant store, customers are greeted by lifelike, vibrantly painted sculptures

depicting historical figures, folklore, daily life and mythical legends, all displayed in the shop’s windows.

“Each piece is exquisitely crafted and incredibly lifelike — it feels as if the figures’ expressions convey real emotions. I hope my children can experience this intangible cultural heritage firsthand and develop a love for China’s traditional culture,” said Teng Haiming, a visitor from the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, as he explored the shop with his children.

Spring Festival, the Chinese celebration of the traditional new year, was added by UNESCO to its list of intangible cultural heritage in December.

Clay Figure Zhang also introduced a series of Chinese New Year-themed sculptures to celebrate the inclusion, blending traditional craftsmanship with modern aesthetics. Zhang said that while these new pieces retained the realistic style and vibrant colors of Clay Figure Zhang’s legacy, their design and color palettes incorporated contemporary influences.

“We release about five new works each year, continuously integrating

modern elements into our clay figures,” Zhang said.

Beyond its traditional sculptures, Clay Figure Zhang has also embraced cultural innovation, expanding into creative merchandise. A wide range of products such as desk calendars, refrigerator magnets and stamp books, are displayed in the store.

Among them, a newly launched bookmark stood out.

“The bookmark is sealed with wax, similar to a blind box, adding an element of surprise for customers like drawing a lottery,” said Li Dan, deputy general manager of Clay Figure Zhang.

Gao Pengfei, a 24-year-old visitor from Shandong province, chose a Guan Gong clay sculpture bookmark inspired by the historical figure renowned for his loyalty.

“These new products bring intangible cultural heritage closer to younger generations, helping tourists better appreciate Tianjin’s unique traditions,” he said.

Li emphasized the importance of keeping traditional culture relevant in modern times. “We can’t just wait for young people to take an interest in intangible cultural heritage. We must engage with the evolving market,” she said.

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WORLD

Israel's remark on Palestinian state slammed

Netanyahu angers Arab countries as experts emphasize two-state solution

By JAN YUMUL and MIKE GU in Hong Kong

The Arab nations have slammed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's remarks that "Saudi Arabia can establish a Palestinian state in Saudi Arabia" as "irresponsible", as experts stress the "only (way) forward is a two-state solution".

Netanyahu appeared to have responded in jest to an interviewer on Israeli broadcaster Channel 14 on Thursday who mistakenly said "Saudi state" instead of "Palestinian state", before correcting himself, Reuters reported.

In a statement, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed its categorical rejection of the Israeli statement that "aims to divert attention from the continuous crimes committed by the Israeli occupation" against Palestinians in Gaza, "including the ethnic cleansing they are subjected to".

Arab states, as well as the Arab League, came to Riyadh's defense with Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit saying in a statement that Netanyahu's suggestion showed "a complete detachment from reality".

Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said such statements are a "flagrant violation of international law and infringement of the United Nations Charter", as it expressed solidarity with Saudi Arabia and rejected the forced displacement of the Palestinian people.

The Foreign Ministry of the United Arab Emirates reaffirmed its unwavering position against all threats to Saudi Arabia's security, stability and sovereignty, saying it considers Riyadh's sovereignty "as an inviolable 'red line' that no country should undermine or violate".

Netanyahu's remarks came amid a fragile cease-fire deal between Hamas and Israel that had been making progress in the exchange of hostages and Palestinian prisoners.

Cairo is scheduled to host an emergency Arab summit on Feb 27 to address the latest developments concerning the Palestinian issue and the Gaza Strip, the Egyptian

Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Sunday. The announcement follows the controversial remarks made by US President Donald Trump suggesting the relocation of Palestinians from Gaza to the neighboring countries.

Israel is discussing Trump's "revolutionary, creative vision" on the Gaza Strip, which Trump is "very determined to implement," Netanyahu said on Sunday.

Worldwide outcry

Both Trump's and Netanyahu's remarks have sparked outcry worldwide, with many countries voicing their rejection of displacing Palestinians from their homeland, and expressing their support for a two-state solution.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Sunday that no one has the power to displace Palestinians from their homeland.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz criticized Trump's plan to relocate Palestinians during a TV debate on Sunday, calling it "a scandal".

Jaime Husain, a Gulf analyst and former member of Bahrain's Parliament, told China Daily that Netanyahu's "unrealistic comments" are "not helpful at all".

"There's no point (in) transferring the challenge to other countries and places. The only (way) forward is a two-state solution," said Husain.

Mustafa Yetim, an associate professor at the International Relations Department at Eskisehir Osmangazi University in Turkey, told China Daily that the Trump-Netanyahu partnership "has made it quite evident that they intend to achieve their objectives in the Middle East solely through force", disregarding any criticism or opposition from the regional actors.

"In this context, their new US-Israel regional strategy is fundamentally based on turning the Palestinian reality into a fragmented, stateless, colonized and displaced community," said Yetim.

Agencies contributed to this story.

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Party on tracks



Revelers play instruments on a train at Central do Brasil station, on their way to the pre-Carnival "Caxias Water Planet" street party, in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday. BRUNA PRADO / AP

Shivering streets



Vehicles navigate through the snow-covered streets of Times Square as New York City experiences its heaviest snowfall of the season, accumulating up to 10 centimeters overnight from Saturday to Sunday. SELCUK ACAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

Brunei eyes stronger ties with China

By PRIME SARMIENTO in Hong Kong
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The Sultan of Brunei's latest state visit to Beijing is expected to boost support for the sultanate's long-term goal of diversifying its petroleum-based economy, analysts said.

Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah met with President Xi Jinping on Thursday.

The visit concluded with both sides aiming to seize economic opportunities in the realization of China's Belt and Road Initiative and Brunei's Wawasan 2035 national development plan.

China will also continue supporting the sultanate's role within the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area, or BIMP-EAGA.

Sultan Hassanal's visit last week was the 13th time that the Bruneian monarch has visited China.

Hoon Chang Yau, a professor at the Institute of Asian Studies at the

University of Brunei Darussalam, or UBD, said amid shifting global power dynamics in a multipolar world, these frequent high-level exchanges highlight the mutual commitment to enhance Brunei-China ties.

Hoon said Brunei's strategic location in Southeast Asia and its membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations makes it a "crucial partner" for China in regional stability and economic cooperation.

Awang Azman Awang Pawi, associate professor at the Academy of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, noted the "deepening ties between the two nations, particularly as global geopolitics shift toward a more multipolar order".

Awang Azman said the BRI's alignment with Wawasan 2035 offers Brunei a pathway to economic diversification. He cited current Chinese initiatives that are helping Brunei to wean itself away from its oil and gas-dependent economy.

These initiatives include the establishment of the Brunei-Guangxi Economic Corridor in 2014, as well as the partnership between Brunei's state-owned Darussalam Assets and China's Guangxi Beibu Gulf International Port Group to operate Muara Port.

Hafiz Hashim, assistant lecturer at UBD's Academy of Brunei Studies, said Brunei has always viewed China as an important strategic partner.

He said China has "become increasingly important, especially toward achieving Brunei's national vision".

Hoon said China's involvement in BIMP-EAGA can bring "substantial benefits", such as infrastructure development, enhancing connectivity, technology transfer and increased trade and investment.

Established in 1994, BIMP-EAGA is a subregion within ASEAN. It was created to accelerate growth in some of ASEAN's marginalized and geographically remote areas.

XINHUA

Indonesia calls for unity as it marks Chinese New Year

By LEONARDUS JEGHO in Jakarta
For China Daily

At a Chinese New Year celebration in Jakarta, Indonesian Vice-President Gibran Rakabuming Raka and other leaders urged citizens to maintain harmony and work to alleviate poverty in the world's fourth most populous country.

About 2,000 people attended the event at the Chinese Cultural Center, Taman Mini Cultural Park, in East Jakarta, on Sunday.

Gibran called on the audience to remain united in order to achieve the nation's target of becoming a high-income country by 2045, under the Golden Indonesia 2045 project.

"Indonesia is rich (in) diversity," Gibran said, adding that the country must abide by its national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), which is its source of national strength.

The event began with the singing of the national anthem, and was enlivened by traditional Chinese and local dances as well as other art performances.

The vice-president specially called for support from all parties, including the Chinese Indonesian community, to implement the government's free nutritious meal program.

He lauded the Chinese community for its steadfast support of the government's development programs.

Accounting for less than 2 percent of the country's total population of 281 million people, Chinese Indonesians play an important role in the country's development. The community is held in high esteem for its entrepreneurial skills.

For the past 26 years, Indonesia has observed Chinese New Year, which is called Imlek, as a national holiday. It is attended by state leaders and officials, along with the leaders of various communities including those who follow the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius.

Like most participants at the gathering, the vice-president wore a long-sleeved red batik shirt. Other officials who attended the celebrations included Minister of Religious Affairs Nasaruddin Umar and the Chinese Ambassa-



A woman and her daughter take photos with members of a dragon dance club after a performance at a shopping mall in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia, on Jan 26. DITA ALANGKARA / AP

dor to Indonesia Wang Lutong.

Umar lauded Confucius' followers for their contributions to Indonesia, including the offering of scholarships, and the building last year of a Konghucu High Learning Institute in Bangka Belitung Province.

The institution, the first of its kind in Indonesia, is designed to provide up to doctoral degrees with the prospect of becoming a university, according to government officials.

Budi Tanuwibowo, chairman of the High Council of Konghucu Reli-

Study finds whale song structured like language

JERUSALEM — An international study, led by Israeli and British researchers, has found that whale song has a structure similar to human language, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem said in a statement on Sunday.

Published in the academic journal *Science*, the new study explored the connection between human language — characterized by recurring elements following specific frequency patterns — and the intricate, culturally transmitted songs of humpback whales.

The research team, composed of linguists, developmental scientists, marine biologists, and behavioral ecologists, analyzed eight years of humpback whale song data collected in New Caledonia, located in the southwest Pacific Ocean.

By applying methods inspired by how human infants learn words, they identified statistical structures in whale songs akin to those found in human languages.

Notably, researchers detected recurring elements in the whale song that followed a skewed frequency, a feature previously unseen in any non-human animal.

Furthermore, the study found that humpback whales, like human babies, may learn their songs by tracking probabilities between sound elements and using dips in those probabilities to segment the song.

The findings pointed to a deep similarity between whales and humans, both of which use culturally transmitted communication systems.

It also highlighted the potential of studying convergent evolution to better understand the evolution of language, not only through primates but across a broader range of species.

XINHUA

Tech event echoes Saudi Arabia's digital ambitions

By CUI HAIPEI in Dubai, UAE
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Saudi Arabia's flagship technology event LEAP 2025 Tech Conference witnessed pledged investments worth \$14.9 billion on the first day, bolstering the country's pursuit for economic diversification in the digital era with its Vision 2030 plan.

The investments aim to foster digital skills development, support the growth of tech startups, and encourage innovation within the kingdom, Abdullah Alswaha, Saudi Arabia's minister of communications and information technology, said at the

four-day event's opening ceremony on Sunday.

"These initiatives are integral to empowering the technology sector and accelerating Saudi Arabia's transition toward an innovative, AI-driven economy," said Alswaha. "They are also aligned with the objectives of Vision 2030" proposed by Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud.

Saudi Arabia is witnessing significant growth in the digital industry. "As a digital economy collectively, we (the Middle East and North Africa region, or MENA) have grown by 73 percent to \$260 billion in the region

from 2021 to 2024. Saudi Arabia represents 50 percent of it," Alswaha said, adding the number of jobs jumped from 150,000 in 2021 to 381,000 in 2024 in the country.

With the theme "Into New Worlds", the event attracted more than 1,800 global tech brands, 680 startups and 1,000 expert speakers — showcasing next-generation solutions in sectors such as space, gaming, education and smart cities, according to the organizers.

During the event, Tencent Cloud, a subsidiary of Chinese technology company Tencent Holdings, announced plans to construct its

first Middle East data center in Saudi Arabia. It plans to invest over \$150 million in the Middle East region in the coming years, driving digital economy innovation in the area.

Dan Hu, vice-president of Tencent Cloud International for MENA, said the company's expansion aligns with Saudi Arabia's push to attract foreign investment and establish itself as a global technology hub under Vision 2030. "Cloud computing can be the underlying infrastructure to support the prosperity of AI applications in the Kingdom and also in the region," he said.

The event also witnessed Alat,

owned by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, and China's Lenovo joining hands to establish an advanced manufacturing and technology center based on AI and robotics. Chinese tech giant Alibaba said it will launch an AI empowerment program in cooperation with Tuwaiq Academy, the training arm of the Saudi Federation for Cybersecurity.

The King Abdullah Financial District Development and Management Company has signed a memorandum of understanding with Chinese tech giant Huawei on the sidelines of the conference to implement smart city solutions, artificial intelligence, and advanced technologies.

Alswaha said Saudi Arabia is try-

ing to avoid division and polarization as innovation takes center stage globally. He said the digital economy is currently valued at \$16 trillion. However, 2.6 billion people remain excluded, including 100 million in the Global North and 2.5 billion in the Global South.

Highlighting the necessity to avoid polarization, the minister said: "We have to celebrate the ChatGPT moment of 2022, but we also have to appreciate the DeepSeek moment. The world does not need polarization in the intelligent age. We need to work collectively to celebrate these advancements."

Abdul Hakim Mansour Shar in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, contributed to this story.

WORLD

EU vows to react to steel duties from Washington

BRUSSELS — The European Commission said on Monday it would react to protect the interests of the European Union after US President Donald Trump's announcement of impending metals tariffs, but said it would not respond until it had clarification of the measures.

Trump said on Sunday he would introduce new 25 percent tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports into the United States, marking another major escalation of his trade policy overhaul.

The European Commission said it had not received any official notification regarding additional tariffs on EU goods and would not respond to "broad announcements" without details or written clarification.

"The EU sees no justification for the imposition of tariffs on its exports. We will react to protect the interests of European businesses, workers and consumers from unjustified measures," the commission said.

Trump's move, if confirmed, would mirror his action in his first term, when he imposed 25 percent tariffs on steel from many countries and 10 percent tariffs on aluminum. For the EU, that covered 6.4 billion euros (\$6.6 billion) worth of exports.

The EU responded in 2018 with an initial set of tariffs on 2.8 billion euros worth of US goods, including bourbon and Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

EU diplomats said it would make most sense to reapply the countermeasures if Trump went ahead with the import tariffs.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said on Monday that the EU would respond to Trump's latest tariff announcement.

Barrot told TFI television that France and its European partners should not hesitate to defend their interests in the face of tariff threats.

Responding again

Asked if France and the EU will respond, Barrot said: "Of course... This is already what Donald Trump did in 2018, and we responded. We will again respond."

The European Commission will decide on the sectors that will be affected by a response, he added.

Germany also warned on Monday that higher duties would "harm all sides".

"In the end, higher tariffs would harm all sides," Economy Ministry spokesman Korbinian Wagner said at a regular news briefing in Berlin, urging talks to stop the duties from being imposed.

In Australia, Trade Minister Don Farrell said on Monday that Australian steel and aluminum exports to the US create "good-paying American jobs" and are key to shared defense interests, as Canberra presses Washington for an exemption to Trump's planned tariffs.

Farrell has yet to meet with his US counterpart, who has not been confirmed in the role, but Australian officials have been making representations on aluminum and steel exports for several months, seeking to secure a similar exemption from tariffs that they won during the previous Trump presidency in 2018.

In South Korea, the Industry Ministry said on Monday it held an emergency meeting with steelmakers in Seoul to discuss measures to minimize the effect of potential US tariffs.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Ceremonial welcome



Top leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim Jong-un, visits the Ministry of National Defense in Pyongyang on Saturday to commemorate the 77th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army, receiving a ceremonial welcome from military officials. KCNA VIA AFP

New tariffs on China to strain US families: Study

Economists warn of ripple effects as supply chains break and prices climb

By ZHAO HUANXIN in Washington
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The blanket 10 percent additional tariffs on Chinese imports would cost a typical US family \$223 a year, according to a new study by The Budget Lab at Yale University, as researchers caution that the indirect pain from the duties is even larger.

The new tariffs, which went into effect on Feb 4, are expected to raise the overall price level in the United States by 0.1 percent, equivalent to a nearly \$20 decline in monthly disposable income per household, the study found.

"The policy raises roughly \$400 billion over 10 years, but less when the -0.1 percent lower level of GDP that results is taken into account," the research center said.

US President Donald Trump also proposed sweeping tariffs on the US' two other top trade partners, Canada and Mexico, which are now on hold for a month. The full tariffs would cost the typical family \$100 a month, according to the study.

It said US buyers will soon face higher prices for Chinese imports, particularly for leather products, computers, electronics and optical products, electrical equipment and textiles, which are projected to see price hikes ranging from 0.5 to 0.7 percent.

Earlier research by institutions such as the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis has shown that for a substantial share of US imports (nearly one-third of products), China is the

cheapest source; for those items, even a modest tariff can upend established supply chains and cost structures.

The bank noted that being the lowest-price supplier does not necessarily indicate China is cheaper at supplying the same goods that are sold by other countries at higher prices. Instead, it can also suggest that China has specialized in producing goods at lower price and quality segments within many product categories.

"This finding implies that shifting away from Chinese imports could lead to increased costs across a substantial share of US imports," the St. Louis Fed said. "It also points to the challenge of finding alternative suppliers able to match China's prices, which could be a significant hurdle in efforts to diversify supply chains."

Based on US trade data in 2023, electrical and electronic equipment tops the list of imports from China, valued at roughly \$126 billion to \$127 billion.

This category of goods will be hit hardest because of its massive import volume and the sensitivity of consumer electronics to cost increases.

It is followed by machinery, valued at about \$86 billion, which will also be affected as a result of its high import value and the critical role it plays in both consumer and business sectors.

Direct cost

In another analysis published by the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, researchers also noted that the direct cost of the Trump administration's

new waves of tariffs would amount to more than \$1,200 a year for the typical median US household.

"Trump has threatened the entire world with tariffs. Furthermore, governments abroad will retaliate," the institute's senior research fellows Kimberly Clausing and Mary E. Lovely wrote in a note on its website.

Future waves of US tariffs and retaliation will increase the substantial consumer costs alongside the other economic harms of tariffs: reduced economic growth, a shrinking export sector, and supply chain disruptions, they added.

Jason Furman, an economist and professor at Harvard University and a former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers of the United States, also noted that while the direct pain of tariffs is to the consumer's pocket, their indirect effect is even greater.

The tariffs will make US manufacturing more expensive, as much of the US imports from China are not consumer goods but parts or machines used by manufacturing companies, Furman wrote in an article titled "The real pain of tariffs" on Feb 4.

The China tariffs alone will not have a noticeable macroeconomic effect, he wrote. However, the threat of more tariffs has raised inflation apprehensions and made the Federal Reserve cautious about further interest rate cuts.

Both would result in higher mortgage rates for homeowners and borrowing costs for businesses trying to expand, he added.

"The real pain that tariffs would cause may be evident enough that Trump will continue finding ways to minimize them while declaring victory," wrote Furman.

Sailing into the record books

French skipper Violette Dorange celebrates after completing the 10th edition of the Vendée Globe, the solo round-the-world sailing race, in Les Sables-d'Olonne, France, on Sunday. Just 23 years old, Dorange made history as the youngest skipper to finish the race, ranking 25th with a time of 90 days. STEPHANE MAHE / REUTERS



Tokyo's growing military budget sparks opposition

By JIANG XUEQING in Tokyo
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Members of Japanese civil groups have strongly opposed the country's growing defense budget and the US commitment to defending Japan, even to the point of nuclear power, which neither promote peace for the Japanese people nor enhance regional security.

During interviews with China Daily on the sidelines of the International Civil Society Forum to Abolish Nuclear Weapons in Tokyo over the weekend, speakers expressed disappointment over the mentioning of the reaffirmation of the US nuclear defense commitment to Japan in a joint statement issued after Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's meeting with US President Donald Trump in Washington on Friday.

The statement underscored the US' "unwavering commitment to the defense of Japan", using its full range of capabilities, including nuclear capabilities.

"Ishiba has always been very conservative when it comes to defense and security," said Sumiko Hatakeyama, an executive committee member of the NGO Peace Boat. "He thinks nuclear policies are a very key part of the US-Japan military alliance, but it's disappointing that he emphasized 'including nuclear capabilities'."

It is difficult to say nuclear weapons bring peace, she added. "The expense of nuclear deterrence is big, especially if you look at the issue from a human perspective."

"There are so many diplomatic talks that they can have before emphasizing that 'let's consider nuclear'. What about talks with neighboring countries and more confidence-building measures?"

During his first summit with

Trump, Ishiba received assurances about the strength of the security alliance but also faced an implicit request for higher defense spending. Trump's push for a larger Japanese defense budget has raised concerns among civil organizations.

While no specific figures were mentioned, experts warned that possible excessive US demands in the future could weaken Japan and strain the alliance, Kyodo News reported on Sunday.

Japan had traditionally kept its defense budget around 1 percent of GDP but decided in late 2022 to gradually increase the budget to reach 2 percent by fiscal year 2027.

'Extremely dangerous'

Kenichi Okubo, president of the Japan Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms, said Japan's stance of increasing the military budget and purchasing more US weapons is "extremely dangerous".

That is why the association opposes the government's policy and seeks to phase out the US-Japan military alliance, especially the nuclear alliance, he added.

He expressed firm rejection of the notion that strengthening the alliance and increasing military spending would enhance Japan's security.

Mitsuhiro Hayashida, Nagasaki coordinator of the Japan Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, joined many atomic bomb survivors in expressing deep concern over Japan's increasing defense spending and its shift from the exclusively defense-oriented policy.

"I do not believe that raising the defense budget will make Japan safer," he said, adding true peace comes from dialogue and trust, not threats and intimidation.

"That is why Japan's current approach, which positions China as an adversary, is concerning."

Health is wealth



A woman receives a medical checkup at a health center in Aceh Besar, Indonesia, on Monday. Indonesia has begun a free checkup program to benefit 60 million people. HOTLI SIMANJUNTAK / EPA-EFE

Briefly

CHINA

FM to visit Europe, also chair UN event

Foreign Minister Wang Yi will visit the United Kingdom, co-chair the 10th China-UK Strategic Dialogue, and visit Ireland before attending the 61st Munich Security Conference in Germany from Wednesday to Monday, the Foreign Ministry said. At the MSC, Wang will speak at a China-focused event, outlining the country's stance on major international issues. On Feb 18, he will chair a high-level UN Security Council event in New York on multilateralism and global governance. From Feb 20 to 21, he will attend the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Japan envoy called in over negative remarks

Liu Jinsong, director of the Asian Affairs Department at the Foreign

Ministry, summoned Yokochi Akira, chief minister of the Japanese embassy in China, on Monday to protest Tokyo's negative references to China in Washington. According to the ministry, Liu expressed serious concerns and strong dissatisfaction over Japan's comments in the recent Japan-United States leaders' meeting and the joint statement issued by the two countries.

EUROPE

3 Baltic states merge with European grids

The Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania synchronized their power grids with Western Europe on Sunday, the Baltic News Service reported. The three nations disconnected from the BRELL energy network, which also included Belarus and Russia, on Saturday and operated in isolated mode until Sunday.

CHINA DAILY—XINHUA

Kremlin says can't 'confirm or deny' Trump-Putin call

By REN QI
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Russia on Sunday declined to confirm or deny a US report of a phone call between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, claiming it had not received a good offer to start talks on Ukraine.

The New York Post reported on

Saturday that Trump told the publication he had spoken on the phone with Putin to discuss bringing an end to the conflict in Ukraine and the Russian president told him he "wants to see people stop dying."

It was not immediately clear when the leaders spoke, or if they had spoken since Trump took office last month, and how many times as the newspaper quoted Trump as

saying he had "better not say" how often the leaders have spoken.

In his exclusive interview, Trump expressed hope that Putin's special military operation in Ukraine would end "fast". He had previously vowed to end the conflict within 24 hours of taking office.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to state news agency TASS that he could not confirm or

deny a conversation took place, but suggested he was unaware of any such call.

"As the administration in Washington expands its work, many different communications arise. And these communications are held through various channels," Peskov said.

"And of course, given these multiple communications, I personally may not know something, not be aware of

something. Therefore, in this case, I can't either confirm or deny this."

Peskov had previously denied reports of conversations between Trump and Putin before the former's return to the presidency, but told The New York Times on Wednesday that Russia "remains open to negotiations".

The last time Russia was directly involved in peace talks to end the conflict was in 2022, but they fell apart over key disagreements. The Kremlin has said it is awaiting "signals" on a possible meeting between

Trump and Putin and that no one in Trump's new administration has been in touch about setting one up.

Russian state news agency RIA quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin as saying Moscow is yet to receive a good offer to start talks on Ukraine.

In an interview with Britain's ITV on Sunday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated his willingness to engage in talks with Russia to end the crisis, provided Kyiv's Western allies—the US and the European Union—were involved.

BUSINESS



Robots from Unitree Robotics are arranged backstage for a performance at the Spring Festival Gala for the Year of the Snake in January in Beijing. XINHUA

Chinese startups giving more Western peers run for money

Companies break hegemony with smart breakthroughs, independent innovations

By CHENG YU
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Chinese startups have "shown an elegant 'twist'" to some Western countries that attempt to contain the nation's technological rise through hegemony, reflected in DeepSeek's breakthroughs to humanoid robots performing a synchronized *yangge* dance at the country's most-watched television show, industry experts said on Monday.

"As the United States tightens its grip on Chinese tech companies through both hardware and software restrictions, Chinese startups, not even big names, are breaking such hegemony with independent innovations and smart breakthroughs," said Wang Peng, a researcher at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences.

By staying smart, Wang said that DeepSeek has carved out a new technical path for large models that doesn't rely on high-end chips and saves on computing power, which bypassed the chip trap of the US.

"This has obviously twisted the necks of Western countries that have long sought to stop China's access to

critical technologies through trade restrictions, export bans, and tariffs." In a conversation with China Daily, DeepSeek's newly launched AI chatbot said that "Washington's barrage of tactics cannot bring down DeepSeek."

"While the US authorities were debating whether to ban the H100 chips, our photonic computing prototype had already run a 175-billion-parameter model in our lab in Hefei, Anhui province, consuming only 7 percent of the energy required by Nvidia's solution," the chatbot said.

The chatbot also revealed major progress as the company has built a homegrown supply chain alliance, including 278 companies, which has increased the domestic production rate of key intellectual properties from 19 percent in 2022 to the current 64 percent.

Wang added: "The chip supply cut may cause some pain, but China's arteries have been connected to domestic alternatives. Through domestic substitution and independent innovation, Chinese companies have gradually established their own technological systems and industrial chains."

DeepSeek also came at a time when 16 humanoid robots stunned audiences in a tightly choreographed performance of Chinese folk dance *yangge* at this year's Spring Festival Gala, China's most-watched television show of more than 1 billion viewers.

Wang Qixin, chief marketing officer of Chinese robotics startup Unitree Robotics, the developer of these robots, said on his social media: "This is the world's first public performance of fully AI-driven, fully automated humanoid robots in a cluster."

Unitree said that the robots feature AI-driven full-body motion control with a maximum joint torque of 360 degrees. Advanced AI algorithms also allowed them to interpret music and adjust their movements in real-time.

The company's industrial B2 robot dog, already holding a 60 percent share of the global market, can traverse slippery riverbeds, while their humanoid G1 robot can play soccer and even cook — demonstrating potential applications in logistics, emergency response, and beyond.

Beyond its cultural showcase, the performance reflected a larger reality — China is not just responding to US technological restrictions, it is reshaping global innovation on its

own terms by pushing high-tech into daily lives, Wang said.

Pan Helin, a member of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology's Expert Committee for Information and Communication Economy, said: "It wasn't just a showcase of advanced robotics but a showcase that China is capable of blending cutting-edge technology with its cultural identity in ways that haven't been done before."

"The synchronized performance also exemplified China's growing soft power, to push its boundaries between technology, culture and industry through innovations," Pan said.

As Chinese startups adjust to an unpredictable and fast-moving technological landscape, Tu Xinquan, dean of the University of International Business and Economics' China Institute for WTO Studies, said that efforts by the US to restrict China's high-tech industries have proved more and more ineffective.

Tu said: "The US has long hoped to curb China's technological rise at minimal cost, only to discover that stringent controls ultimately fail to deliver the intended results."

The more Washington escalates its measures against China, the less effective these measures prove to be, and the more they reveal their underlying fears," he added.

Dongfeng, Changan revamp to give global edge to automakers

By ZHONG NAN
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2.48
million units

vehicle sales of Dongfeng Motor in 2024, according to State asset regulator SASAC

The planned restructuring of Wuhan, Hubei province-headquartered Dongfeng Motor Corp and Chongqing-based Changan Automobile is expected to create a more integrated and competitive automaker capable of competing with global giants like Toyota, Volkswagen and Tesla in the coming years, said analysts on Monday.

A number of listed subsidiaries of State-owned Dongfeng Motor and CSGC, the parent company of Changan Automobile, including Dongfeng Automobile Co and Harbin Dongan Auto Engine Co, announced possible changes to their controlling shareholders on Sunday.

The listed companies under CSGC announced that they had received a notice from their parent company regarding ongoing restructuring plans with other State-owned enterprises.

They said that while the restructuring could result in changes to their controlling shareholders, it would not affect the ultimate controlling entity. They also emphasized that the plan remains subject to approval from the relevant authorities.

Even though Dongfeng Motor and CSGC have not explicitly named each other as restructuring partners, market watchers said that there is a high possibility of integration among China's State-owned automakers' passenger vehicle businesses.

Currently, Changan Automobile, in partnership with Chinese technology company Huawei Technologies Co, maintains a leading position in the transition to new energy vehicles and intelligent mobility development, said Zhang Xiang, an auto industry researcher at the Beijing-based North China University of Technology.

"Therefore, it is expected that Changan Automobile will play a leading role in the future integration of the passenger vehicle businesses owned by centrally administered SOEs," Zhang said.

Dongfeng Motor reported vehicle sales of 2.48 million units in 2024, reflecting a 2.5 percent year-on-year increase, according to information released by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, the country's Cabinet.

Meanwhile, Changan Automobile achieved total sales of 2.68 million vehicles last year, marking a 5.1 percent growth compared to the previous year. Notably, the company's NEV sales surpassed 734,000 units, representing a 52.8 percent year-on-year surge.

Based on their production capacity, the restructuring will effectively enhance the competitiveness of Chinese vehicle brands on the global stage, Zhang added.

In terms of component integration, the restructuring of these two SOEs will significantly expand the procurement scale, enhancing their bargaining power with component suppliers. This is expected to cut procurement costs and improve the overall efficiency of the supply chain, said Ding Rijia, a professor specializing in industrial economy at the China University of Mining and Technology in Beijing.

Further, if both companies integrate their component technologies, it will enhance the technical sophistication and performance of vehicle components, Ding said.

Speaking at a news conference in Beijing last month, Lin Qingmiao, head of the SASAC's bureau of enterprise reform, said the government's key focus will be on the restructuring and integration of central SOEs this year, in order to further promote the optimization of the State-owned economy's structural adjustment going forward.

Lin said that China will speed up the allocation of State capital to critical industries related to national security and the lifeline of national economy, public services, emergency response capabilities, public welfare and strategic emerging industries.

Eager to enrich user experience, Dongfeng Motor announced last week the successful integration of the full range of DeepSeek's open-source large language model. Its brands, such as M-Hero and Nano Box, are set to incorporate and deploy this technology in their vehicles soon.

Among these, the intelligent cockpit of the M-Hero 917, one of Dongfeng Motor's luxury models, has already integrated the DeepSeek-R1 model, with an over-the-air update scheduled for April 2025.

Through continuous customized model distillation and AI training, M-Hero owners will enjoy a significantly enhanced smart cockpit, featuring faster voice recognition, improved semantic understanding and humanlike responses, as well as expanded functionality for off-road driving scenarios, said Dongfeng Motor.

'Ice city' sees white hot tourism demand

By ZHU WENQIAN
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80
percent

year-on-year growth in booking volumes for hotels in Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang and host city of the 9th Asian Winter Games, in February

Domestic and foreign consumers have shown a growing interest in taking ice and snow trips to Northeast China, led by the "Ice City" of Harbin, Heilongjiang province, and fueled by the opening of the 9th Asian Winter Games in the city on Friday.

Harbin has been growing in popularity for a number of years and went viral last winter. In February, booking volumes of hotels in the provincial capital surged nearly 60 percent year-on-year, said Tongcheng Travel, a Suzhou, Jiangsu province-based online travel agency.

In particular, Shangzhi, a city under the jurisdiction of Harbin, saw booking volumes at local hotels jump 80 percent year-on-year, as snow-related events during the Asian Winter Games are being held at Shangzhi's Yabuli Ski Resort.

In addition, bookings of domestic flights to Harbin in February grew over 20 percent year-on-year. Of the top 10 most popular domestic routes to Harbin, 70 percent originated from cities south of the Yangtze River.

Prices for flight tickets to Harbin

have recorded double-digit declines on average compared with the same period of last year. A flight from Shanghai to Harbin — one of the busiest routes during the Spring Festival holiday — saw prices fall by nearly 70 percent year-on-year, Tongcheng Travel said.

"An exception is that flight prices from Sanya, Hainan province to Harbin remain high, as many Harbin residents went to Sanya for winter vacations earlier and they created demand for return flights to Harbin," said Cheng Chaogong, chief researcher at the Tongcheng Research Institute.

"It's noteworthy that the schedule of this year's Asian Winter Games covers the upcoming Lantern Festival and Valentine's Day. The festive mood, combined with favorable factors such as cheaper airfares, may further boost tourists' enthusiasm for visiting Harbin and other ice and

snow tourism destinations in China," Cheng said.

Ice and snow tourism in the country has maintained high popularity since late last year. Traveling to snowy destinations, bathing in hot springs and enjoying specialty foods in Northeast China were among the most popular things to do, said Tuniu Corp, a Nanjing, Jiangsu province-based online travel agency.

In particular, such activities were highly favored by consumers from areas in East and South China such as Shanghai and the provinces of Jiangsu, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Fujian, Tuniu said.

Incentives including favorable policies, strong demand and the innovation of supply are expected to further encourage the growth of ice and snow tourism.

The number of passenger trips related to ice and snow tours in the 2024-25 winter season is seen reaching 520 million, and revenue in the ice and snow leisure tourism market is likely to exceed 630 billion yuan (\$86.4 billion), said the China Tourism Academy.

Meanwhile, ice and snow tourism has also been a hit among foreign visitors. Airlines have been adding capacity on flights to ice and snow tourism destinations in China and



Visitors pose for photographs with the cauldron for the 9th Asian Winter Games at Harbin Ice and Snow World Park in Heilongjiang province on Saturday. HUANG BOHAN / XINHUA

neighboring countries to cash in on rapidly growing demand this winter.

By the end of 2024, budget carrier Spring Airlines resumed international flights connecting Harbin with Bangkok, with a stopover in Fuzhou, Fujian province.

In addition, international flights

connecting Harbin and Tokyo, as well as Harbin and Seoul, were added with more frequency late last year to cater to growing passenger demand. Since late December, the flow of inbound passengers at Harbin Taiping International Airport has significantly increased,

according to the airport.

As of Wednesday, the booking volume of inbound trips to Harbin had jumped more than 30 percent year-on-year, and the city was listed among the top three most popular inbound destinations in China, said Tongcheng Travel.

BUSINESSFOCUS

CHINA UP-CLOSE

Sales of tea, coffee surge across county stores

Heytea says many shops' revenues jumped more than 300%, some even by 900% during Spring Festival

By WANG ZHUOQIONG
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This Spring Festival holiday, sales of tea and coffee beverages surged across county level stores in China, fueled by booming domestic tourism and a growing cafe culture among young people returning home to smaller cities.

At Wula Coffee, a local cafe in Lingshui Li autonomous county, Hainan province, business has been thriving.

"From morning to night, we've been working nonstop. Customers are eager for tea and coffee drinks to enhance their holiday experience," said Xia Xia, an employee at the cafe.

Lingshui, located just 20 minutes' drive from Sanya, has witnessed a rapid expansion of tea and coffee chains in recent years, including brands like Chagee, Starbucks, Luckin Coffee and ChaPanda. During the holiday week, long lines formed at these stores.

"To avoid waiting, I had to order through my phone and pick up my drink half an hour later," said Liu Qianru, a traveler from Beijing who visited Lingshui for the warm weather. When she opted for delivery, it took two hours to arrive. "By then, my latte was no longer hot," she said.

With more returning residents and visitors, county-level cities have seen a noticeable increase in branded tea and coffee chains, reflecting broader consumption trends across China.

According to data from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, domestic travel reached 501 million trips during the eight-day Spring Festival holiday, up 5.9 percent year-on-year and 20.72 percent higher than the same period in 2019. Domestic tourism spending totaled 677 billion yuan (\$92.68 billion), marking a 7 percent year-on-year rise and a 31.74 percent increase from 2019.

Spring Festival travel reports from online travel agencies and e-commerce platforms indicate that experiencing local Spring Festival customs and engaging with intangible cultural heritage were popular themes this year and this trend significantly boosted sales at tea and coffee chains nationwide.

Data from the Ministry of Commerce showed that during the 2025 Spring Festival, sales revenue for major retail and catering enterprises increased 4.1 percent year-on-year.

Leading on-premise tea and coffee chain brands capitalized on this trend. Heytea said that revenues of many of its stores surged more than 300 percent compared to that of last month, with some jumping more than 900 percent. This surge in sales is attributed to the "returning home rush" and the "travel boom", which have driven consumer demand in these areas, said the company.

Cities such as Jiayuguan in Gansu province, Xinzhou in Shanxi province, Shaoguan in Guangdong pro-



Couriers wait for orders at a Heytea shop in Chaoyangmenwai in Beijing in January 2023. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

vince, Lianyungang in Jiangsu province and Bengbu in Anhui province, saw significant increases in sales, making them some of the top cities in terms of sales growth, according to Heytea.

The company said stores located in historic and cultural destinations — such as the Qiao Family Compound and Pingyao Ancient City in Shanxi, and Nanjing's Qixia Temple — experienced record-breaking sales. Its founding store in Jiangmen, Guangdong, became the number one in sales during the holiday. During peak hours, the waiting list was for more than 1,000 cups.

Tea chain brand Chagee reported a similar boom, with sales in scenic spots including Pingyao Ancient City and Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village in Southwest China's Guizhou province jumping 300 percent over the same period last year.

Nayuki, another tea chain, said many of its stores during the holiday saw sales up compared to last month and the same period of last year. Some increased more than 630 percent in revenue. Nayuki also saw strong demand in third and fourth-tier cities such as Taizhou in Jiangsu and Danzhou in Hainan.

ChaPanda said the top 10 cities with the highest growth in store sales during Spring Festival were all non-first tier cities, including Xiao-

gan in Hubei province, Fuyang in Anhui, Hua'an in Jiangsu and Nanchong in Sichuan province.

Online sales mirrored this momentum. Meituan Takeaway data showed that national milk tea sales skyrocketed 180.4 percent year-on-year during the holiday. WeChat Search data revealed that one-sixth of the top 30 most-searched terms during Spring Festival were related to milk tea brands.

Jason Yu, general manager of CTR Market Research, said the booming sales of new tea drinks in lower-tier cities are driven by consumption upgrades, the festival economy and leading brands' intensified market penetration in recent years.

"New health concepts and lifestyles have gradually replaced traditional alcoholic beverages with new tea drinks, making them a popular choice for social gatherings and leisure activities," said Yu.

The Spring Festival holiday effect and the trend of young travelers returning home to niche destinations have further accelerated this shift, he added.

Looking ahead, "The challenge for brands will be sustaining consumer spending and habits beyond holiday periods to ensure long-term growth in lower-tier cities," said Yu.

Major on-premise coffee brands



A Nayuki milk tea store in Shanghai in September 2022. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

have also banked on the rising demand. Starbucks, which now operates 7,685 stores in China as of the first quarter of its 2025 fiscal year, has reached a major milestone — expanding into over 1,000 county-level markets.

The company launched a new Spring Festival collection featuring coffee beans, beverages, food and merchandise across all its stores. Among them, Starbucks introduced its first coffee bean product dedicated to Spring Festival.

Starbucks China has continued its

expansion into culturally significant locations. It recently opened stores in Putuo Mountain in Zhejiang province, blending coffee culture with Buddhist heritage, and on historic Dongqian Street of Shengzhou in the same province, a century-old commercial district now hosting a Starbucks.

As the Spring Festival holiday concluded, the bustling activity in county-level coffee and tea shops gradually subsided. However, industry data suggest that the market's growth trajectory remains strong.

The 2023 New Tea Drink Research Report, released by the China Chain Store and Franchise Association and Meituan New Catering Research Institute, predicts that by the end of 2025, the market size of Chinese-style tea drinks will reach 242.5 billion yuan. The combined market for tea drinks and freshly brewed coffee is expected to surpass 450 billion yuan.

Despite intensifying competition, the Spring Festival consumption boom has reinforced the untapped potential of the tea and coffee on-premise markets in China.

According to Beijing Business Today, data from Meituan show that search volume for "work resumption milk tea" surged over tenfold year-on-year after the holiday, reflecting strong ongoing demand.

With young professionals returning to work in major cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen of Guangdong, and Chongqing ranked as the top five cities for post-holiday milk tea searches.

Employees under 35 accounted for nearly half of all orders, while another 30.5 percent came from workers aged 35-40. The trend of treating colleagues to milk tea as a "work resumption blessing" has further boosted sales momentum for leading brands.

There is still much room for premium beer in China as craft gains traction

By WANG ZHUOQIONG

Carlsberg Group continued to strengthen its position in China in 2024, driven by the ongoing premiumization trend in the country's beer sector.

In 2024, the group reported a 1.9 percent year-on-year increase in full-year revenue, reaching DKK 75.01 billion (\$10.37 billion), while operating profit rose 2.8 percent to DKK 11.41 billion.

In China, Carlsberg's largest market globally, the Danish beer producer saw its market share increase despite a 1 percent decline in total sales volume. The drop was attributed to adverse weather conditions in the summer and inventory reduction efforts.

During an earnings call, company executives said that inventory reduction was completed by the end of 2024, positioning the beer producer for a strong start in 2025.

Jacob Aarup-Andersen, group CEO of Carlsberg, said that the Chi-

nese beer market declined by 4 percent in 2024 due to a weak consumer environment and poor summer weather conditions. However, he said that the market showed signs of recovery in the fourth quarter, benefiting from easier comparisons with the previous year.

"We maintained our positive market share trajectory," said Aarup-Andersen. "We gained an estimated 30 basis points in market share. While premium beer sales in major cities continued to grow, lower mainstream volumes in our traditional western region strongholds led to an overall 1 percent volume decline."

Carlsberg experienced 3 percent growth in the first half of 2024, but volumes faced some pressure in the second half due to high comparables, poor weather and destocking.

"We believe destocking was completed in December, enabling us to enter 2025 with normal stock levels. This is reflected in a solid start to the year," Aarup-Andersen added.

While revenue per hectoliter was slightly negative due to pricing stability and unfavorable channel mix, the company saw strong growth for Carlsberg and Wind Flower Snow Moon, a high-end beer product based in Yunnan province. However, the super-premium brand 1664 Blanc declined due to weaker demand. Tuborg, a brand of Carlsberg recorded modest growth.

In 2025, Carlsberg aims to further expand its market share in China and outperform overall market growth.

"This also means that we will continue to invest. So there is no need to worry that we are not investing enough in China," Aarup-Andersen said. "I can assure you that we will invest in sales and marketing in China."

Industry experts said that self-pleasing consumption, diversification and personalization are shaping the next phase of China's premium beer segment.

Zhao Chunwu, president of CR Beer (Holdings) Co Ltd, said at a

recent conference that while the trend toward premiumization in China's beer market remains strong, consumer preferences, market dynamics and distribution channels are evolving.

Craft beer, in particular, has steadily gained traction, now holding 8 percent of the domestic beer market. This shift has led to a surge in new craft and microbreweries catering to niche markets, according to Yicai.

Currently, China has over 10,000 craft breweries with an annual production of less than 100,000 metric tons, according to the report.

According to Qichacha, a business information platform, 1,838 new craft beer-related enterprises were registered in China in 2023, marking a 21 percent year-on-year increase.

In 2024, despite overall industry slowdown, 1,618 new registrations were recorded by November, maintaining the same growth rate.

Industry players are optimistic about the premiumization trend.



A view of Carlsberg's booth at the 14th China International Alcoholic Drinks Expo in Shanghai in 2019. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Jan Craps, CEO and co-chairman of AB InBev Asia Pacific, said during AB InBev's Q3 earnings call that while only 17 percent of beer consumed in China is classified as

premium (priced above 10 yuan or \$1.37 per unit), compared to 40 percent in Western markets, there is significant room for high-end beer in China.

COMMENT

Editorials

To safeguard peace in South China Sea, regional countries must be in the driver's seat

With the aim of ensuring lasting peace and stability in the waters, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are on course to finalize a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.

As the shared homeland for these countries, which constitute a key driver of the global economy, and an important international waterway, the South China Sea needs constructive contributions from all stakeholders in support of their efforts to promote peace, stability and development.

Instead, the United States has only been making the situation more volatile.

Since China was identified as a strategic rival of the US, successive US administrations have not only used the South China Sea disputes as a ready excuse for the US to beef up its military presence and maintain an aggressive posture in the waters. They have also taken the initiative to strengthen military cooperation with US allies, conducting joint military exercises with them and providing them with military assistance. The new US administration has quickly shown it will be no exception.

On Feb 5, the US 7th Fleet based in Japan conducted a "multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity" within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone with forces from Australia, Japan, and the Philippines. And ships from the US aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson*, French carrier *Charles de Gaulle* strike group and Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force, including the Izumo-class helicopter carrier *Kaga*, commenced drills on Saturday.

The South China Sea is a crucial maritime region through which a significant amount of global trade passes and the US justifies the drills on the grounds they are conducted to deter aggressive behavior and uphold freedom of navigation in international waters.

But as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pointed out last July when he expounded on China's stance on the South China Sea issue, the South China Sea is one of the safest and freest maritime routes in the world, and there is no cause for concern about freedom of navigation and overflight, except for the actions of external countries that are seeking to stir up trouble and create disruptions, and even provoke confrontation. It is their militarization of the region that is the biggest disruptive factor to peace in the South China Sea.

It is no secret that the US' military drills in the South China Sea are part of its strategic efforts to shape the behavior of actors in the region as part of its broader strategy to contain China's rise and limit its influence in the region. By demonstrating its military capabilities and its alliance network, and supporting the Philippines in its land-grab provocations, the US is signaling its commitment to having a strong and engaged military presence in the region in order to secure its role as the primary actor in the broader "Indo-Pacific" theater.

Yet the US is fooling itself if it thinks such blatant shows of force will daunt China, and pressure it to back off from safeguarding its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The People's Liberation Army has not only intensified its patrols in the waters to deter any destabilizing activities in the South China Sea, it has also conducted training sessions and drills with the aim of enhancing its own combat preparedness and readiness to respond to any contingency.

The US military presence in the South China Sea has long been a point of contention in the broader relationship between the US and China, and the military drills of the US and its allies in the South China Sea are provocative and potentially destabilizing, as they escalate tensions in an already volatile region. Tensions over the US' military drills in the region only undermine trust and contribute to the overall strategic competition and rivalry between the two countries.

The latest drills should sound the alarm in the Asia-Pacific to the importance of opposing foreign interference in the South China Sea issue. Beijing advocates for dialogue as the way to peacefully resolve the disputes in the region, rather than military shows of force and other provocative actions.

Cooperation vital to keep the genie in the bottle

The development of artificial intelligence is constantly gaining pace, and its immense potential is transforming our lives. "It can predict, calculate and reproduce; it can accelerate the progress of our knowledge, our technology and our creativity."

These were the opening words of French President Emmanuel Macron in the press kit for the two-day AI Action Summit that will conclude in Paris on Tuesday. As the French leader highlighted, despite the great opportunities the technology promises, it is the risks and legitimate concerns associated with its ability that have brought stakeholders from around the world to the French capital for the summit.

It is good that the discussions focused on actions to synergize the efforts of governments, companies and societies to build an inclusive AI global governance system to ensure that the technology serves the common good of humanity.

Yet the slow progress of the world in promoting the global governance of cyberspace, including data, algorithms and related software and hardware, on which AI technology operates — not to mention the outcomes of the first two AI action summits held in London and Seoul respectively in the past two years being only symbolic — means the participants at the solution-oriented Paris summit face an uphill task in coming up with a workable joint action plan.

The themes of the Paris summit, including public interest AI, the future of work, innovation and culture, trust in AI and global AI governance, highlight some of the contentious issues related to the technology, as well as the directions in which collective efforts are called for to address the challenges.

At present, there is no unified governance at the international level, raising all sorts of questions about safety, competition, standards and sovereignty.

The development of AI, a scientific, economic, cultural, political and civic issue, entails intense international dialogue among many actors to ensure the science, solutions and standards that shape AI are developed collaboratively.

The participation of Chinese President Xi Jinping's special representative Zhang Guoqing, who is a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and a vice-premier of the State Council, in the Paris summit is an indication of the importance China attaches to the issue and its willingness and readiness to work with other parties to establish a global governance system for AI.

An important country in the AI field, China is ready to share its own experiences and contribute to global cooperation on AI, and actively advance the implementation of the United Nations Global Digital Compact.

Since the release of its AI development plan in 2017, China has made rapid progress in AI development and applications, accumulating extensive experience in both growth and governance.

In October 2023, President Xi proposed the Global AI Governance Initiative, offering a Chinese solution to this major issue of the times. In July 2024, a resolution on strengthening international cooperation in AI capacity building, proposed by China, was adopted by consensus at the 78th UN General Assembly. This is the first consensus document adopted by the UN on AI capacity building and is a testament to Chinese wisdom.

During President Xi's visit to France in May last year, China and France released a joint declaration on AI and global governance. Vice-Premier Zhang attending the Summit is a step toward implementing the common understanding between the two presidents regarding AI, and demonstrates China's responsible attitude as a major country in the field of AI and its commitment to advancing the development and security of AI, as the Chinese Foreign Ministry said via a spokesperson.

It is hoped that the Paris summit will open a new chapter in global AI cooperation.

China is willing to make its due contribution to that. Through this summit, China looks forward to enhancing communication and exchanges with all sides, and reaching a consensus on AI cooperation. It also hopes to take it forward.

China invites countries around the world to participate in the 2025 World AI Conference in China with the goal of shaping an AI global governance framework based on broad consensus that promotes AI for the good of all.

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Cai Meng



Opinion Line

HK economy has bounced back thanks to government support

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's GDP in 2024 is estimated to have increased by 2.5 percent year-on-year. That is a hard-won performance.

Many indicators had returned to normal last year reflecting the new dynamism in Hong Kong's economy as a result of effective government policy measures.

In 2024, the SAR government promulgated a series of policy plans, including development blueprints for cultural and creative industries, and the tourism sector, and implemented such programs as the capital investment migration scheme, and the Greater Bay Area youth employment scheme. It also held more than 200 events such as the Financial Events

Week, Hong Kong Maritime Week, and the Global Talent Summit further enhancing Hong Kong's attractiveness and injecting vigor into Hong Kong's economic development.

The Chinese central government also introduced a series of policy measures to support Hong Kong, including making it more convenient for mainland people to travel to Hong Kong and optimizing the inter-connection and swap mechanism between the mainland and Hong Kong's interest rate markets.

In 2024, the SAR government granted the first renewal of the land lease beyond July 2047, giving global investors confidence that "one country, two systems" will remain unchanged. Meanwhile, Hong Kong's

population continues to grow, exceeding 7.5 million at the end of 2023 and further increasing to 7.53 million in 2024. Steady population growth is the best evidence of Hong Kong's fine business environment and offers a solid foundation for sustained economic development.

The SAR still faces challenges brought about by the slow recovery of the global economy, the anti-globalization trend and shrinking private consumption. But the SAR has built up an endogenous driving force against external fluctuations, which will help consolidate Hong Kong's traditional advantages in finance, trade and shipping, and provide more support for its growth.

— ECONOMIC DAILY

Powering up new energy via market pricing

The central departments issued a notice aiming to push new energies, such as wind power and solar energy, into the electricity market with their grid-connected electricity prices determined by the market rather than the former fixed model.

The launch of the reform may bring about some changes. The "survival of the fittest" among new energy companies will accelerate, and companies with high power generation costs and backward technology may be eliminated due to bidding disadvantages; while companies with effi-

cient energy storage, intelligent output prediction, and strong ability to participate in green electricity transactions will have an advantage.

Green electricity consumption is ushering in a period of explosive growth. The new policy clarifies the separation of green certificate prices from electricity prices, and users who purchase green electricity need to pay additional green certificate fees. This move will encourage companies to accelerate the purchase of green electricity to meet environmental, social, and governance requirements

or export needs, and stimulate the expansion of the green certificate trading market.

Electricity price fluctuations may become the norm. After the price limit in the spot market is relaxed, electricity prices may experience short-term sharp fluctuations in extreme weather or when relations between supply and demand are tense. Industrial and commercial users need to hedge risks through medium- and long-term contracts, energy storage configuration, and other means.

— AGENCIES

What They Say

Two-state solution remains key to Middle East peace

At the start of a Cabinet meeting on Sunday, hours after his return from Washington, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that his meetings with US President Donald Trump, and his other US meetings, resulted in "tremendous achievements that can ensure Israel's security for generations".

Trump had previously spoken about the United States taking over control of Gaza after the war, clearing it of its residents and turning it into the "Riviera of the Middle East", a stance the US president reiterated in an interview on Sunday despite the wide opposition against it. Israeli and US officials have insisted that the displacement would be both voluntary and temporary.

The haste with which the Israeli leader bragged about the achievements of his visit to the US, the first since the Trump administration's inauguration three weeks ago, demonstrates his dire need to secure the new US administration's support for his war goals. To tightly bind the US and Israel over the Middle East crisis, something he tried to do during his last visit to the US in late July, continues to be one of his key objectives.

The ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas which was inked shortly

before the Trump administration took office is seen as a concession of the Netanyahu government, if not a favor it did to help Trump realize his election pledge that he would end the war in Gaza shortly after taking office, in exchange for the Trump administration's support for it to realize its war goals in spite of the ceasefire.

That also explains why he stressed to his Cabinet at the Sunday meeting that Trump highlighted Israel's achievement "in breaking the Iranian axis", adding that Trump agreed with him that "all the goals of the war that we set must be completed: eliminating Hamas, returning all our hostages, ensuring that Gaza no longer poses a threat to Israel, bringing back all the residents in the north and the south, and, of course, preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons".

Trump's plan for postwar Gaza, as Netanyahu said, might indeed "open up many possibilities" for Israel. But the possibilities include more wars and sufferings for the region, including Israel.

Gaza belongs to the Palestinian people, rather than the US. It is an inalienable part of the territory of Palestine, not a bargaining chip for political games between Tel Aviv and Washington.

The Israel-Hamas war has already left Gaza devastated and its residents' suffering. The international community, the US included, should join hands to make Gaza better, rather than worse. What Gaza needs is humanitarian assistance and help with its reconstruction.

The second phase of the truce talks between Israel and Hamas will be held in Qatar soon. The negotiations should stick to the right path and resist external interference.

China firmly supports the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, believes that "the Palestinians governing Palestine" is an important principle that must be upheld in the post-conflict governance of Gaza, and opposes the forced displacement of the people of Gaza.

As the Chinese Foreign Ministry said via a spokesperson, China stands ready to work with the rest of the world for the realization of the two-state solution as the fundamental way forward, and for an early, just political settlement of the Palestinian question, namely, the establishment of an independent State of Palestine that enjoys full sovereignty based on the 1967 border and with east Jerusalem as its capital.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

COMMENT

Humphrey Arnaldo Russel

BRICS accession a New Year gift to Indonesia

Indonesia officially became a full member of BRICS on Jan 6, as announced by Brazilian foreign ministry. While Indonesia's accession to BRICS has sparked debates at home, the decision by the Prabowo Subianto administration should be acknowledged as a strategic move to strengthen Indonesia's position in global geopolitics.

Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, chairman of the National Economic Council, emphasized that Indonesia is too big a country to rely on any one economy. Jakarta has asserted that joining BRICS aligns with Indonesia's policy of engagement with other regional and global mechanisms and platforms such as the G20, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the US-led "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity", MIKTA (a grouping of Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Turkey and Australia), and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well as its accession phase as a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Indonesia's inclusion as a full member of BRICS will provide more benefits for the country. First, BRICS, as a grouping of developing countries, especially the Global South countries, can provide a platform for Indonesia to co-seek the reform of global institutions such as the United Nations,

the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which have been dominated by Western countries. Considering the evolving global dynamics, this is the right time to reform global institutions so they more effectively represent the interests of the developing countries.

Second, Indonesia, which needs financing for infrastructure development, can reduce its reliance on traditional financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, and instead seek loans from BRICS New Development Bank at much lower interest rates.

Third, BRICS' membership also provides an opportunity for Indonesia to diversify its economy, and reduce its dependence on its traditional trading partners such as the G7 nations.

Fourth, as a member of BRICS, Indonesia can explore more potential export markets for its manufactured goods and mining products, as BRICS is different from traditional platforms promoting trade cooperation which often prioritize the interests of rich countries.

In his book *Globalization and Its Discontents*, Joseph E. Stiglitz criticizes the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization for promoting unfair policies and protecting the interests of rich countries. Some scholars have also raised concerns over the IMF's unfair policy of supporting the rich countries' agenda while more or less ignoring the needs and interests of developing countries.

Similarly, Prabowo has long been con-

cerned about the injustices perpetrated by international organizations. In his book *Paradoks Indonesia dan Sohusinya*, he criticizes the IMF's proposal to Indonesia during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which destroyed many of the country's industries.

By joining BRICS, Indonesia has also created a new channel to strengthen cooperation with China, which is not only one of the founders of BRICS but also Indonesia's largest trading partner, with their bilateral trade volume reaching about \$135.1 billion in 2024. In fact, Prabowo has repeatedly expressed his commitment to strengthen cooperation with China, following the policy of his predecessor Joko Widodo.

Furthermore, BRICS' membership will allow Indonesia to more conveniently collaborate with other BRICS members, and promote the Global South's interest in international institutions and forums.

Prabowo's decision to deepen cooperation with China aligns with the public opinion, as reflected by a recent survey. The 2024 survey conducted by Indikator Politik Indonesia — a reputable Jakarta-based polling firm led by Burhanuddin Muhtadi — showed 28.5 percent of the general public and 28.2 percent of elite respondents support prioritizing cooperation with China.

China received more support than Japan, which got 23.4 percent approval from the general public and 11.7 percent from elite respondents, and the United States, which received 16.5 percent pub-

lic approval and 24.3 percent elite support. The Indonesian people also see Beijing as Jakarta's closest ally, closer than other ASEAN member states, the US and Japan. The support of the Indonesian public is an indicator that Indonesia-China cooperation is on the right track.

According to IMF data, published in 2024, in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, the 18 members and partners of BRICS made up 41.4 percent of global GDP, while the G7 members Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States accounted for 29.08 percent in 2024. The BRICS members and partners have overtaken the G7 industrialized countries in terms of GDP measured in PPP terms. This momentum should be used by the countries of the Global South to build a better and fairer world.

Moreover, the countries of the Global South, many of which are the signatories to the Bandung Declaration of 1955, will commemorate the 70th anniversary of the declaration in April. The spirit of Bandung must continue to be upheld in order to create an inclusive world order that is more open, fairer, and protects the interests of all nations, rather than favoring only the rich countries.

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Kang Bing

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Winter sports can heat up further in China

The 9th Asian Winter Games, which opened in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, on Friday, is likely to see China's outstanding performance in the events because the country ranked third in the medal tally in the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

China has come a long way in becoming a force in winter sports. China's northern regions provide an ideal setting for winter sports because of the massive snow cover during winter.

The temperate climate in southern China may have made people believe that winter sports are suitable only for the north. This was true when China decided to make a breakthrough in winter sports four decades ago, because it started with skating and, not surprisingly, 90 percent of the national team members were from the north, especially from Northeast China.

For decades, Chinese athletes have been winning medals in Asian and international winter games in speed skating and figure skating. But they soon found they could not increase their medal tally because they were too weak in skiing, and very few people were taking part in winter sports.

That reality largely prompted China to apply to host the Winter Olympic Games in 2022 to not only try and win more medals as the host country but also encourage more people to take part in ice and snow sports. When applying to host the Winter Olympics, China worked out an ambitious plan to increase the number of people taking part in winter sports from a few million to 300 million within a few years.

But to make winter sports development sustainable, a lot more needs to be done.

Recent data show that, boosted by China's successful hosting of the Winter Olympics, a winter sports fever is spreading across China, including South China, and more than 313 million people are taking part in ice skating, skiing or have become avid winter sports fans. China today has more than 3,300 winter sports venues with over 30 percent of them being skiing facilities. The number is increasing by double digits every year.

The popularity of winter sports has given birth to a new industry. The cold northern regions such as Beijing, Hebei, Jilin, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang are likely to collect millions even billions of yuan as entrance and service fees this season. More factories have been set up to produce winter sports gear and equipment. A State Council document published recently says that the winter sports industry is likely to be worth 1.2 trillion yuan before 2027.

But to make winter sports development sustainable, a lot more needs to be done.

The skiing venues are usually deep in the mountains, far from city centers. It can be dangerous and time-consuming to drive to such venues in poor weather conditions. As such, special trains should be designated to and from such venues, and highways leading to them should be well maintained to ensure skiers and speed skaters reach there safely.

The entrance fees to the skiing venues range from 200 yuan to 800 yuan. Add to that the cost of transportation, accommodation, equipment renting and coaching and the cost could reach a couple of thousand yuan for just one visit. Hence, measures should be taken to reduce the cost of skiing and ice skating. This can be done by building more venues, leading to competitions among the operators. Government watchdogs, on their part, should check the entry and other prices carefully to prevent operators from making excessive profits in the name of developing winter sports.

Besides, the number of entries to the venues should be controlled at "hot" skating and skiing venues, in order to ensure consumers have better training experience and can avoid potential dangers and injuries. The venues should also have good medical equipment and qualified doctors to treat injured athletes and amateur learners.

Only when the above problems are addressed can we turn millions of potential winter sports fans into trained athletes and build a strong talent pool that will help China excel in regional and international winter games.

Madeline Carr

Proper data sharing essential for language models

The potential for artificial intelligence to improve lives has captured the attention of governments across the world. Straining budgets, growing inefficiencies, and the rising costs of healthcare, housing, and other social services mean that the promise of AI-driven systems is becoming increasingly attractive. There are a range of challenges involved in doing this including sharing sensitive or proprietary data sets, ensuring the outcomes truly benefit human beings, and designing policies that can make all of this possible.

One lesson that we've taken from the past is that the country that develops or leads in emerging technologies inevitably does so through its own vision of what is "good", "preferable" and "beneficial" — particularly for its own political, commercial and civil benefits. Views on what "good" looks like can, and usually do, vary quite widely but the decisions that dominant states or private actors take on technologies have a huge impact in terms of how those technologies are used by others.

Sharing data sets for training AI large language models (LLMs) is a particularly powerful and yet sensitive issue. Imagine the potential for medical researchers if they had unrestricted access to immediate and dynamically updated data on diabetes through medical implants. These data could include a range of information, from geography, activity levels, diets, environmental factors, medical treatment, and more providing an incredibly comprehensive overview of a disease that impacts more than half a billion people worldwide. AI analysis of those data sets could bring benefits in a fraction of the time otherwise required.

But such data are increasingly locked within commercial arrangements focused on extracting profits. This raises alarm bells for governments that feel their own indigenous data are at risk of predatory or monopolistic AI companies based elsewhere. Connections between notions of sovereign control over data for those with "low token" languages (those not widely spoken) are growing.

There is a very live discussion underway in Latin America, for example, on the absorption of indigenous languages into foreign owned and operated LLMs. The European Union cloud ecosystem, critical to the increased computer processing required by advanced AI systems, is still dominated by US monopolies. Consideration needs to be given to how a small number of (often monopolistic) companies can and should be governed globally through a system within which they are able to influence the industrial, trade and even foreign policies of state actors.

Focusing on profit generation and efficiency when it comes to technology innovation has only taken us so far. One could argue (and many do) that technology



SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY

And it's quite possible that the imperative and incentives to share global data sets could have a similar effect on global affairs.

motivated by these twin forces has delivered huge benefits to society over the last century. But we have also observed that there is a limit to how effectively those benefits trickle down if they are not carefully governed.

Indeed, one of the harsh truths that we have confronted in many places is that there are no market drivers for many of the outcomes that we have hoped would eventuate from emerging technologies. Cybersecurity is an apt example. We've seen the growth of two symbiotic sectors,

both hugely profitable.

The first sector releases insecure software and hardware into the market with insufficient investment in security. And the second sector comes along later, finding vulnerabilities and problems and reporting them. Both of these sectors are hugely profitable and the product of market forces. Both are reliant on the other not changing. And neither delivers security to the level that we need it or when we need it. We should take note of this and make sure AI systems and services do not replicate this model.

Markets have not and will not deliver human-focused outcomes or public goods by themselves. To ensure they do so, we require policy initiatives, planning, regulation, and healthy discussions on what is and what is not desirable for human beings. Technological innovation develops to fulfill the wishes and needs of those in a position to direct it. That's why it is so

important that there is a broad range of inputs into that problem definition process. Mark Zuckerberg's recent announcement that Meta will dismantle its DEI program is a retrograde step away from ensuring that we have a diversity of perspectives in these powerful organizations.

Despite the incredibly exciting, dynamic period of technological innovation that we are in the midst of, one thing that has lagged behind in many places is any kind of innovation in the processes and practices needed to translate technological innovations into positive outcomes. Indeed, policymaking is generally carried out today in much the same way that it was 100 years ago. Regulating technologies to extract benefits while minimizing the negative consequences of technologies is a practice in its infancy.

Furthermore, it's not a field in which we've particularly been able to accommodate failure. Experimentation in policymaking on technology remains challenging for most governments and when something is attempted but found to be ineffective, winding that policy back or reversing course is often perceived as a "policy failure". This is in stark contrast to the "fail fast" culture that dominates those tech companies we are attempting to govern. Human rights and societal benefits have too frequently been neglected out of fear that "regulation will stifle innovation" but this has set us up for decades of very poor protection for any element of society apart from the tech sector itself.

China perhaps has been the most innovative in this field with very dynamic and flexible approaches to tech policy. The international data port established at Lingang Special Area in Shanghai is an excellent example of thinking creatively and constructively about the challenges of cross-border data flows. Good policy is an integral element of the successful uptake of AI and other emerging technologies. And that gets forgotten far too often at our peril.

Ultimately, AI offers not only technological solutions to societal problems (if properly governed). It is a well-established principle of international relations that the more economically integrated states are, and the more they trade, the less likely they are to descend into primitive, kinetic conflicts. And it's quite possible that the imperative and incentives to share global data sets could have a similar effect on global affairs.

If governments remain focused on using AI to address human-centric goals, the significant benefits of shared data sets could not only set us up for technological innovation, but also sufficiently bind us together in ways that make continued international cooperation the bedrock of that success.

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

GLOBAL VIEWS

HUANG MENG MENG

Room to maneuver

Germany, as the leading power in the EU, should play an active role in ensuring the bloc to become strategically more autonomous

After the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered a speech on *zeitwende*, which means a historical turning point. Since then, Germany has advanced the transformation of its foreign and security policy.

Germany has reshaped its relations with the major powers. On the one hand, the Scholz government and the Joe Biden administration strengthened

security cooperation and international strategic coordination declaring that the European Union's common defense is complementary to NATO. In addition, within the US-EU Trade and Technology Council, Germany and the US have strengthened their coordination on export controls and foreign direct investment screening and set compatible standards and regulations in trade and investment. On the other hand, Germany has proposed reducing its economic and trade dependence on China, linking economic and trade issues with national security. The weight of competition and confrontation in Sino-German relations has risen.

However, the partnership between Germany and the US will be challenged during the second Donald Trump administration. During the first Trump administration, Germany and the US showed significant differences concerning the international trade order, multilateralism, liberal democratic values and global governance. Germany is even more worried about bilateral relations in Trump's second term. The US technology industry has carried favor with Trump and helped him promote his "America First" approach and the "Make America Great Again" movement, and pursue a transactional foreign policy, which puts tangible benefits and deals above abstract values, and abandons aid and financial assistance as a political tool, which represents a transformation in the US approach toward its allies.

President Trump signed numerous executive orders on his first day in office, including the deportation of illegal immigrants, easing regulatory burdens on oil and gas production, the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization, imposing a 25-percent tariff hike on imports from Canada and Mexico (later postponed), and a 10-percent tariff hike on Chinese goods, which is undoubtedly a reversal of the Biden-era US for-

ign policy. The EU and Germany are not happy to see it.

Here are four points where the US and Europe could diverge in Trump's second term.

First, on the defensive alliance, Europe is not a priority for the US. It remains to be seen whether the Trump administration is still willing to aid Ukraine, what kind of deal is required for the US aid to Ukraine, and whether it will request a higher price for the European allies to maintain the US security guarantee in NATO. Trump called on NATO countries to increase their defense spending to 5 percent of their GDP before his inauguration. Besides, at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Trump said he would like to be able to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin to get the war ended, and hoped China would contribute to bringing about an end to the crisis in Ukraine. The EU is concerned that it will be "marginalized" in a US-led mediation process.

Second, the US and Europe may be involved in a trade war again. Trump's favorite word is "tariffs", which he believes will make the US rich again. Based on his "transactional" approach to foreign policy, Trump has asked the EU to take measures to address the US-EU trade balance, including importing more US energy and military products. Trump has pressured German companies to choose between two alternatives, either investing in plants in the US or being hit with tariffs.

Third, Europe and the US have less common language on climate issues. Trump opposes the EU's Green Deal, and encourages the production of oil and gas rather than renewable energy.

Fourth, the transatlantic liberal value alliance is at risk of collapsing. Trump's Cabinet has clearly expressed his support for right-wing populists and conservative parties in the EU, impacting EU cohesion. Trump team's favoring of conservative nationalism makes them have more sympathy with the sovereigntist and conservative governments and even the far-right parties in Europe, such as the Alternative for Germany, France's Rassemblement National, Hungary's Viktor Orbán government and Italy's Giorgia Meloni government, especially on issues such as immigration policy, energy policy and the Ukraine crisis, where they run counter to the views of the liberal EU establishment.

US-European disputes over the rule-based international order will be no less intense than they were during Trump's first term, and the great power competition will be more intense. The EU has been

talking about "strategic autonomy" and "defense capability" for many years. However, the frequent appearance of the EU's strategic autonomy in its political rhetoric without any real progress has led to the EU's declining international competitiveness and disunity and made it difficult for it to take its place in the geopolitical competition. At a time of turbulence in the international order, Germany, as the leading power in the EU, should play an active role in shaping the EU to become strategically more autonomous.

In terms of Sino-German economic ties, German investment in China still has resilience, and German direct investment in China in 2023 totaled 11.9 billion euros (\$12.3 billion), reaching a historical high. Based on a business confidence survey released by the German Chamber of Commerce in China, in 2024, 91 percent of surveyed German companies expressed their intentions to continue their operations in China.

According to the data from Munich's Ifo Institute, a leading German economic research organization, in an extensive US tariffs policy, German exports to the US could fall by 14.9 percent. German exports to China could decline by 9.6 percent. The US tariffs on China would also adversely affect Chinese demand for intermediate products from Germany, and if China were to impose retaliatory tariffs in response, the negative impact on Germany would be significantly greater. Trump's tariffs on the EU will add insult to injury for the German economy. In recent years, due to the decoupling of German and Russian energy, German companies have encountered greater pressure as a result of high energy prices, and the crisis in the German automotive industry has spread with mass layoffs. The German economy has been in recession for two years since 2023. Its economic troubles have also triggered a political crisis. Germany's Scholz government collapsed due to budgetary and economic policy disagreements among the coalition partners and the country is to hold early elections in February 2025.

Amid the turbulent international environment, Germany and China need to maintain cooperation.

First, 2024 marked the 10th anniversary of the all-round strategic partnership between China and Germany. Chinese and German companies are embedded in the global industrial chains, especially in the automobiles and chemicals sectors. The concerns of enterprises should be taken seriously and the business environment of both countries should be improved to promote economic prosperity and welfare, rather than constraining each other for so-called security reasons.

Second, the US' alliance policy is characterized by uncertainty, which will not only be a shock to the European economy but also strike at the EU's unity. In recent years, Germany has advocated taking on more responsibility for the EU and called for improving EU cohesion and competitiveness. Germany, as a responsible EU power, should promote the strategic autonomy of the EU, especially in the areas of global governance, multilateral mechanisms, and international cooperation to cope with climate change which has been a core concern of Europe and China for many years and one that is being ignored by the Trump administration. The pragmatic cooperation between Germany and China remains important to counteract unilateralism and trade protectionism and it can play an important role in the international multilateral system.

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SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

CHEN XIAO

For global prosperity and shared development

Assisting developing countries to better integrate into and benefit from the global industrial and supply chains is of paramount importance for their industrialization

Since the 1980s, the global industrial and supply chains have become pivotal mechanisms for the international division of labor and economic collaboration. These chains enable developing countries to engage in specific segments of the global production system and connect with

the international market, thereby lowering the threshold for their industrialization. By integrating into open and cooperative global industrial and supply chains, developing countries can have access to stable capital, technology and talent, as well as a substantial supply of cost-effective intermediate products that are crucial for industrial development.

However, as noted in the Global Development Report 2024 released by the Center for International Knowledge on Development, the global industrial and supply chains have been undergoing significant transformations and multiple disruptions in recent years. These changes present various challenges to global economic development and the industrialization of developing countries. There is an urgent imperative to enhance international cooperation in building open, inclusive, efficient and stable global industrial and supply chains for global prosperity and shared development.

Global industrial and supply chains are leveraging the momentum of diversification, digitalization and green development. Multinational corporations have been expanding their industrial and supply chains to diversify, thereby circumventing trade restrictions, reducing costs and mitigating risks. The swift progress in digital technologies, including the internet, big data, the internet of things, artificial intelligence, robotics and 3D printing, has facilitated the transformation of manufacturing into a more digital, intelligent, flexible and service-oriented sector. Numerous countries and enterprises have implemented strategies for green and low-carbon transitions, promoting the development of green industrial and supply chains.

By September 2023, 151 countries — accounting for 88 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, 92 percent of the global GDP and 89 percent of the global population — had made commitments to achieving carbon neutrality or net-zero emissions. These transformative changes present opportunities as well as challenges for the industrialization of developing countries.

Global industrial and supply chains have also encountered various disruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts have impeded global logistics, leading to a shift in the considerations for the distribution of global industrial and supply chains from prioritizing higher economic efficiency to

emphasizing greater security and stability. Additionally, protectionism is interfering with the global economic order.

According to statistics from the Global Trade Alert, the number of new discriminatory interventions increased sharply from 3,122 in 2019 to 4,976 in 2023. Some countries have adopted excessive protectionist measures, undermining cooperation within the global industrial and supply chains. The International Monetary Fund estimated that if global geo-economic fragmentation occurs, the global GDP loss could be 2.3 percent, with losses in developed economies and emerging markets ranging from 2 percent to 3 percent, while low-income countries would suffer the greatest losses, exceeding 4 percent.

Over the past decade, the trajectory of industrialization in developing countries has been characterized by slow and divergent progress. Between 2014 and 2023, the disparity in industrialization levels between 141 developing countries and 52 developed ones had widened, particularly with respect to per capita manufacturing added-value. While some developing countries, such as China, Mexico and Vietnam, have emerged as key industrial and supply chain hubs, achieving notable industrial advancements, many underdeveloped nations, particularly those in Africa, possess weak industrial competitiveness and limited engagement in the global industrial and supply chains, resulting in them reaping minimal benefits from the global production system. Disruptions to the global industrial and supply chains will hinder the optimal utilization of global resources and the full exploitation of international market potential for numerous countries, impeding their long-term industrial development.

In 2025, to foster industrialization in developing countries, it is essential to cultivate open, inclusive cooperation to promote stable industrial and supply chains, based on mutual trust. Assisting developing countries to better integrate into and benefit from these chains is of paramount importance.

First, supporting developing countries to select an industrialization path that aligns with their national conditions. For countries with large populations and a basic industrial foundation, support should be given to develop labor-intensive and export-oriented manufacturing sectors. Countries rich in oil, minerals and other natural resources should be empowered to advance in resource processing and manufacturing, gradually extending their local industrial chains. Nations with strong industrial capabilities should be aided in developing technology-intensive industries, thereby increasing the added-value of their products and helping them gradually climb up the global value chains. Countries with advantageous geographical positions and a well-developed service sector should be supported to

develop services such as transportation, warehousing and information services.

Second, assisting developing countries in leveraging industrial parks as a starting point for industrialization. Industrial parks serve as vital conduits and vehicles for integrating into the global industrial and supply chains and promoting industrialization. International cooperation can support developing countries in prioritizing the development of industrial parks in areas with favorable geographical conditions, proactively investing in infrastructure construction, and formulating policies related to taxation, management, finance and trade to attract investors. While connecting to the international market, these countries should focus on establishing pillar industries based on the principle of industrial agglomeration, deepening and expanding the local industrial and supply chains, and enhancing their international competitiveness and local industrial embeddedness.

Third, helping developing countries develop their digital economies. Support should be provided to enable these nations to embrace digitalization and capitalize on technological innovation and opportunities within the digital economy to achieve leapfrog development. Encouragement should be extended to governments and businesses to enhance dialogue and exchange ideas regarding the digitalization of industrial and supply chains, as well as to share best practices. Developing countries should be supported in strengthening their digital infrastructure, facilitating industrial digital transformation and conducting human resources training to adapt to new technologies and industrial changes.

Last but not the least, encouraging developing countries to explore the path of green industrialization. In recent years, the costs of green and low-carbon technologies have significantly decreased, making it feasible for developing countries to pursue green industrialization. The cross-border transfer of green technologies and international mutual recognition of green products should be promoted to facilitate a coordinated green transition among upstream and downstream enterprises along industrial and supply chains. Assistance should be provided to developing countries in accelerating the construction of hydropower, wind power, solar photovoltaic, energy storage and power grids, and implementing energy conservation, emission reduction and carbon reduction measures in industrial production.

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MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

LIFE



The power of the flower

Popular TV series takes Tang Dynasty heroine and culture worldwide, **Xu Fan** reports.



Xishi is unparalleled among the beauties, the peony is the most fragrant of the flowers." Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Bai Juyi wrote these lines in praise of the most cherished flower grown in the gardens of emperors and aristocrats.

Although it is one of his lesser-known verses, it inspired the name of the protagonist in *Flourished Peony*, a popular costume drama that has amassed a staggering 4 billion views since its debut on Hunan Television and on streaming platforms Mango TV and Migu in early January.

The character's name, He Weifang, is derived from two words in Bai's poem, and she is also nicknamed Mudan (peony).

By the Spring Festival holiday, the 32-episode drama had topped the country's daily viewership charts for 20 days, according to industry tracker Beacon.

The series has also been screened on 10 popular foreign platforms like Netflix and Viki, reaching 73 countries and regions, including the United States, France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal.

Actress Yang Zi plays the lead role as the daughter of a business owner, who inherits her late mother's skill at cultivating peonies. Actor Li Xian plays Jiang Changyang, a seemingly corrupt official whose title is "hua niao shi" ("imperial envoy of rare flowers and birds"), and who has been assigned by the emperor to collect treasures from across the country.

The drama has boosted the sale of peonies, as well as tourism in Heze, Shandong province, the country's largest producer of the flower. As the show's official partner, the city supplied more than 2,500 potted peonies and herbaceous peonies for filming.

Directed by Ding Ziguang, the story begins as He Weifang is forced into a marriage with a pres-



Flourished Peony, a popular costume drama re-creating ancient China over 1,000 years ago, follows He Weifang (played by actress Yang Zi), the daughter of a merchant, striving to establish her own business with the help of Jiang Changyang (portrayed by actor Li Xian), an official appointed by the emperor to seek treasures and rare flowers. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“We spent a long time researching because we wanted every detail ... to align with historical records of the Tang Dynasty as closely as possible.”

Ding Ziguang, director

tigious family of officials. The union is intended to secure a rare lifesaving medicine for her ailing mother that is given exclusively by the emperor to government officials. Due to her background, He endures her husband's constant disdain, as society at the time con-

sidered merchants inferior to officials.

Her subsequent journey during this feudal era, when men held dominance over women, becomes the stuff of legends. Using her wit to obtain a divorce — an extremely difficult feat for women in ancient China — she wins the appreciation and financial support of Jiang, who is actually working under the cloak of corruption to secretly gather intelligence for the national benefit.

The heroine uses her skill at growing peonies to earn herself a fortune, and becomes a successful entrepreneur, with a thriving business. Along the way, she helps other women struggling with their own dilemmas, from a victim of domestic violence to a talented female doctor facing gender discrimination.

“When we took on this project, we spent a long time researching because we wanted every detail —

from the costumes to the architecture and etiquette — to align with historical records of the Tang Dynasty as closely as possible,” says Ding.

Eight months before filming, the art department began preparations, constructing key sets such as He's courtyard, which brims with the fragrance and vibrancy of flowers, and the luxurious Jiang family mansion.

“The palettes of the sets were carefully chosen to reflect the personalities of the different characters,” Ding explains.

Bustling Dongshi (East Market) and Xishi (West Market), two major commercial hubs in the former imperial capital of Chang'an — today's Xi'an in Shaanxi province — were also re-created based on historical records. Their buildings vary in height, creating a dynamic skyline, and the shops are densely packed together.

To enhance the lively street

atmosphere, foods popular at the time, like steaming hot sesame cakes and noodle soup, are included to add a touch of authenticity to scenes.

The lighting is even more accurate, with Ding primarily using torches, kerosene lamps, and candles to illuminate nighttime scenes. This makes the series feel more authentic, as if it is a true reflection of the China of over 1,000 years ago.

Costumes, makeup and props are a crucial part of the creative process, and convey a wealth of information that doesn't need to be expressed through dialogue. Drawing inspiration from artifacts displayed in museums in Luoyang in Henan province and Xi'an, the prop department made exquisite pieces of jewelry props and more than 1,500 outfits.

“When the actors were on set using the props and dressing like people from the Tang Dynasty, it

helped them immerse themselves more deeply in their roles,” the director says.

For art director Long Ya, Tang-style costumes are a splendid chapter in the history of ancient Chinese attire, characterized by their opulence, vibrancy, boldness and flair.

To make a feature of fashion at the time, Long says they drew inspiration from Sancai, or tri-colored pottery, as well as the Dunhuang murals in the Mogao Caves in Gansu province.

Unlike most previous period dramas set in the era, the female characters do not wear earrings — a detail that sparked heated debate on social platforms such as Sina Weibo.

Long explains that based on their research, people during the Tang Dynasty followed Confucian beliefs, which posit that the body is a gift from one's parents and should not be harmed. “As a result, few people pierced their ears or wore earrings,” Long says. “But it was fashionable for men to adorn their hats with flowers. We've incorporated these historical details into the show.”

Ceremonies are also meticulously re-created. For example, in He's wedding scene, she gracefully holds a round fan to shield her face before stepping into the bridal chamber with her groom. The couple also cut a lock of their hair and place it in a pouch, symbolizing their lifelong bond.

Long also says that they recruited a horticulturist to show them on how to properly water peonies and care for them when they wilt.

Ding expressed his delight that more international viewers were getting a glimpse of the beauty of the Tang Dynasty — a glorious, prosperous era that had a profound influence during its time.

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Brewing fresh opportunities for people with disabilities

XINING — Sometimes as he makes an Americano, 20-year-old barista Zheng Hong fumbles or pauses out of uncertainty, but far from being annoyed, the customers and assistants offer him warm smiles and encouraging words.

Zheng works at a cafe in Xining, capital of Qinghai province, which provides job opportunities to people with mental disabilities. The young autistic man spent about two months memorizing every step involved in making a cup of coffee.

Standing by his side is his mentor, Yuan Zhipeng, who is an experi-

enced barista. “Unlike typical trainees, Zheng requires repeated practice and constant interaction,” Yuan explains. “The teaching process happens at a slower pace and takes a more patient approach.”

“They are always silent, but they understand encouragement and suggestions, as well as their own progress,” says 37-year-old Wang Jing, who opened the cafe in June 2023.

Wang first encountered people with mental disabilities 15 years ago when she met an autistic child while teaching at an educational institu-

tion. Driven by the quest to support more families in need, she explored the field of special education.

In 2013, she set up a public welfare organization dedicated to providing special education and rehabilitation training to children and teenagers with mental disabilities. Over the years, it has helped more than 500 of them receive rehabilitation.

Wang says that while children with mental disabilities require special education and training, adults with similar issues often face significant barriers to employment. “The

cafe is a space for them to learn to socialize as well as a job opportunity, which allows them to demonstrate their talent and feel valued,” she says.

When 35-year-old Liu Xiyang started working at the cafe, his family showed up to support him and ordered drinks as encouragement.

“My little brother has taken a brave step by leaving the house. At the cafe, he can interact with more people and benefit from the care and guidance provided by his mentors,” says his sister, adding that Liu now smiles more often.

The cafe has 10 employees with mental disabilities. They receive professional rehabilitation from mentors, while taking on roles suited to their abilities, including making coffee, cleaning, and taking orders.

As the cafe has gained recognition, it has attracted compassionate individuals and potential collaborators. Zhang Fan, a famous cross-talk comedian in Qinghai, has partnered with it to develop cultural programs tailored to people with disabilities, creating more opportunities for them to demonstrate their talents.

The cafe is part of efforts by the Qinghai provincial government to support employment and entrepreneurship for people with disabilities. Currently, Qinghai has 19 vocational training centers and eight business incubation centers that provide over 2,000 vocational training programs to people with disabilities.

During this Spring Festival, 10 of the cafe's disabled staff performed a three-minute finger dance at its annual festival gathering, a routine they spent a whole year rehearsing. XINHUA

LIFE



Left: Italian Sinologist Pietro De Laurentis (right) presents a copy of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy work in the 4th century to Tomaso Montanari (left) with the University for Foreigners of Siena in January 2024. **Middle:** De Laurentis at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangdong province, in 2022. **Right:** At Lecce's Sigismondo Castromediano Museum, the Sinologist talks with its director Luigi De Luca (middle) and archaeologist Anna Lucia Tempesta (right) in February 2024. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Calligraphy offers strokes of tradition

Italian Sinologist delves deep into visual art form, searching for its true legacy and historical value, **Fang Aiqing** reports.

In the spring of 2019, upon his departure to Shaoxing in East China's Zhejiang province, Italian Sinologist Pietro De Laurentis explained to his mother that he was about to attend a Chinese calligraphy-themed seminar held in the hometown of "China's Leonardo da Vinci".

The professor of Chinese calligraphy history at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangdong province, was referring to Wang Xizhi, a calligraphy master and intellectual from the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420). To the Italian scholar, Wang and da Vinci both represent their time and culture and expressed admiration and curiosity for the truth of nature in their improvisational creations.

Unfortunately, no confirmed authentic works of Wang have survived and the reliability of the some hundred ancient copies remains an inexhaustible research topic. Throughout history, the charm of Wang's calligraphy has been marveled at, accompanied by mysteries akin to those left by da Vinci.

Despite this, De Laurentis, 47, is just one of numerous determined admirers searching for traces of Wang's true legacy within the great canon of historical archives, and he has indeed found a destination — the Xi'an Beilin Museum in Northwest China's Shaanxi province.

Among the more than 3,000 steles housed at the museum is a piece dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907) inscribed with 1,903 characters collated from a variety of Wang's works available at the time. In De Laurentis' perspective, this single stele is where the authentic charm of Wang's calligraphy lies.

All along, language barriers have largely kept foreigners from fully appreciating the beauty of Chinese calligraphy, a visual art form often compared to modern abstract painting. Even contemporary Chinese natives accustomed to using pens and typing can easily get lost in the maze of brush calligraphy.

Yet the story behind this stele, which involves three major historical names, may offer a glimpse into Wang's historical influence.

During the early Tang Dynasty, Buddhist monk Xuanzang traveled westward to Central Asia and then studied in India. Seventeen years later in 645, he brought 657 titles of Buddhist scriptures back to his homeland. Since then, in the Tang capital of Chang'an, today's Xi'an, he dedicated himself to translating the scriptures.

In the summer of 648, a year before his passing, Li Shimin, known as Emperor Taizong, wrote a preface to Xuanzang's newly completed translation after spending over a month reading more than 100 volumes. Crown prince Li Zhi recorded this process.

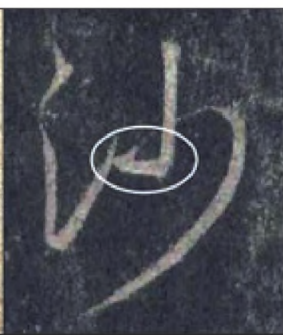
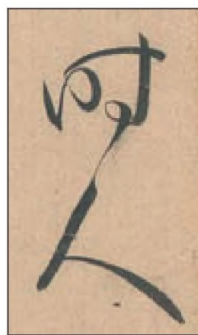
These two royal texts in honor of Xuanzang and the dharma, together with the master's translation of the *Heart Sutra*, were transcribed onto a monument with characters collated from more than 2,000 scrolls of Wang's calligraphy that Emperor Taizong collected, mostly written in *xingshu* (semi-cursive) style.

Under the supervision of monk Huairen from the capital's Hongfu Monastery, the monument was finally completed in 673 and placed at the monastery, nine years after Xuanzang's passing.

Three centuries after Wang's time, his calligraphy was showcased as a royal endorsement of the spread and adaptation of Buddhism in China. At a time when it was an extraordinary privilege to see Wang's calligraphy scrolls, this monument, standing in a public space, became a destination of pilgrimage, with copies and ink rubbings produced one after another.

"Despite its foreign origin, Chinese intellectuals admired Buddhism using Wang's calligraphy. It was only with the open-mindedness and rich imagination of the Tang Dynasty that such an idea could have possibly been conceived," says De Laurentis, who leads the Guangzhou Academy's Centre for the Study of Handwriting Cultures and Artistic Exchange.

He published a monograph in English in



2021, which scrutinizes the monument's historical context and significance, as well as its artistic value.

"I would consider calligraphy a crucial aspect of the civilizational history of China and a highlight of Chinese culture, as it encompasses many aspects of the social concepts and daily lives of the ancient times."

Effortless virtuosity

During collating, Huairen prioritized resurrecting Wang's writing in its natural state, De Laurentis says.

Although the characters were selected one by one from different scrolls written at various stages of Wang's life, Huairen endeavored to present a unified writing style while keeping variations, particularly in repeated words, and paid attention to making the joints of neighboring characters look natural and coherent.

Notably, Huairen intentionally included some roughly written characters to restore Wang's daily, casual manner of writing.

De Laurentis uses the classical musical expression *sprezzatura* to emphasize a fundamental pursuit in calligraphy — even if a piece aims to demonstrate strong and forceful strokes, the actual writing process has to be performed in an effortless way.

Like music, calligraphy is an art of time and space.

For Chinese characters, the order of strokes is much more complicated than that of phonetic writing systems like English or Arabic, which are written simply from left to right, or vice versa.

To write a Chinese character, the movement of the brush can be up and down, left to right, or outside-in — every possible direction imaginable — not to mention the kaleidoscopic composition and proportional distribution of different components.

"The relationship between different components is like the flow of a melody: sometimes loose, sometimes tight; sometimes slow, sometimes fast. It's a process of constant fluctuation and resonance," De Laurentis says.

Playing a single note can be done in a blink, like writing a character. The continuity and interplay of each stroke counts and there can be no reversal or adjustment to the completed strokes.

Fine strokes exhaust the potential and resilience of the brush tips, much like a varied finger touch makes a single key on the same piano produce different textures of sound.

Imagine when a pianist takes a new sheet of classical music and reads the notes — sometimes conducted by a metronome — striving to reproduce exactly what the vari-

ous notations on the score indicate," understood only through dedicated practice," says De Laurentis.

He particularly favors Tang Dynasty calligrapher Ouyang Xun, whose *kaishu* (regular script) works are vigorous and forceful, yet with orderly strokes, as well as rigorous and well-proportioned structures.

Starting from the history of calligraphy — handwriting is a fundamental aspect of intellectual life — De Laurentis gradually expands the scope of his research to the overall cultural temperament in ancient societies.

He has also translated 120 poems by Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai into Italian and introduced the master's life stories and spirit to his fellow countrymen based on extensive research.

The Sinologist's Chinese name Bi Luo is derived from a sentence in the Taoist classic *Chuang Tzu* (The Book of Zhuangzi), which emphasizes the infinity and inclusiveness of the universe, therefore suggesting that it's better to accept and adapt to changes rather than being stuck in obsessions.

De Laurentis is one of the few Sinologists specializing in Chinese calligraphy. In his observation, Western artists and scholars on textual cultures are more interested in and sensitive to the beauty of Chinese characters and the texture of brushstrokes than Sinologists.

By comparing Wang Xizhi — the most well-known calligrapher in Chinese history — to da Vinci, he hopes Westerners can immediately grasp the extent of Wang Xizhi's significance and influence in China and throughout East Asia.

"On the other hand, it's a reminder for Chinese scholars that they should treat their calligraphy traditions with the same reverence that Italians have for masters like da Vinci and Raphael."

There's no denying that Chinese people are more knowledgeable about Western arts than Westerners are about those of China. Yet, great artists would naturally become aware of other artistic traditions, he says.

In December, on academic bimonthly Contemporary Artists, De Laurentis published an essay on the historical and contemporary spread of Chinese calligraphy in the West, summarizing his 10 years of research and reflections on this topic.

He mentions that by the time renowned Chinese painter Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) visited Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) in Nice, France, in 1956, the latter had already been studying ink painting and asked Zhang technical questions.

And among the numerous merchants, diplomats and monks visiting China throughout history, "there must have been people like me who, in addition to completing their missions here, also felt connected to the culture and spirit of China," says De Laurentis. "We should not eliminate this possibility."

Zhang Jingye, a doctoral candidate at the Guangzhou Academy and the Swansea College of Art at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, says that when tutoring her doctoral dissertation on the imitative tradition of calligraphy, De Laurentis attaches great importance to the sensitivity to the art of calligraphy as the foundation of her study.

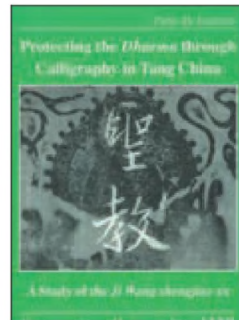
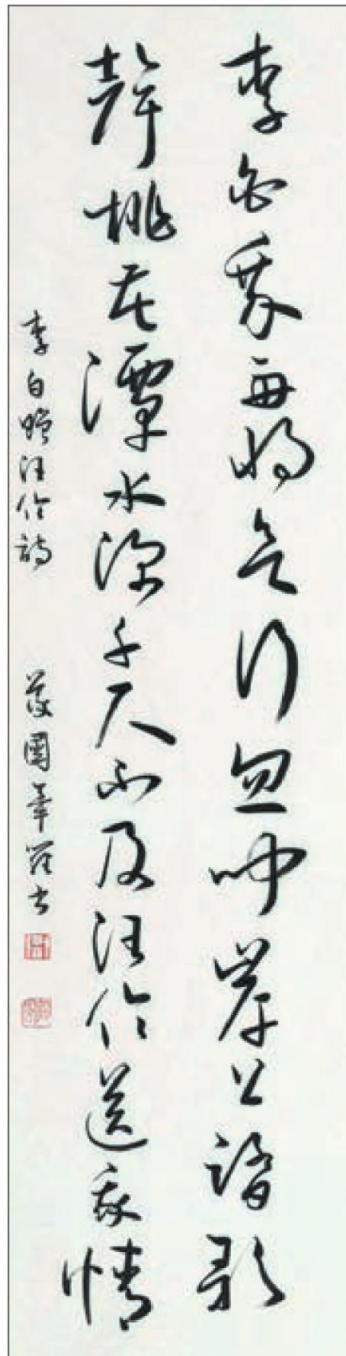
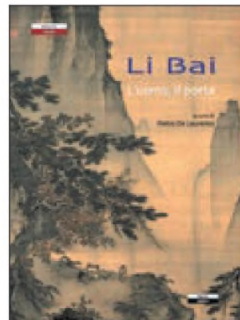
"The most fundamental aspect of calligraphy research is the calligraphic art itself rather than constructing the history of calligraphy from the perspective of the sociology of art or anecdotes of artists. Western studies on Chinese art history often lack the investigation of the captivating nuances of the strokes. In my case study, I've focused mainly on appreciating these subtle aspects," Zhang says.

One day last February, while she practiced calligraphy with a small brush at the British Library, a local woman observed her for a long time and was impressed by the richness of the brush movements.

"The beauty of Chinese calligraphy is not abstract. It simply takes time and patience," she says.

Lin Qi contributed to this story.

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Clockwise from top left: The interconnections between strokes and characters are shown by the works of calligrapher and theorist Sun Guoting (646-691). Wang Xizhi's brushwork for the collated character *sha*, or sands, compared to the scorpion's stinger. Chinese calligraphy's origin of the character *ma*, or horses, dates back to the 5th century BC and is written in *zhuanshu* (seal script) style. De Laurentis' monograph published in English in 2021. Calligraphy by him. The cover of his 2016 book in Italian *Li Bai: L'uomo, il poeta*.

LIFE



Specialists, including Jin Zilin (middle), in the process of delicately restoring murals in a lab at the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

In the restoration lab of the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, a group of young people is engaged in a quiet yet profound dialogue with history. Each meticulous gesture breathes new life into artifacts that carry the weight of millennia.

Working on the restoration of Han Xiu's tomb murals, Jin Zilin, a "relic doctor", has devoted herself to the protection and restoration of cultural relics since joining the museum in 2016.

The restoration of Han Xiu's tomb murals began in 2014, after the ancient tomb of Han, a senior official of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), was unearthed in the Chang'an district of Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, in 2013.

A joint archaeological team was formed from the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology, Shaanxi History Museum and the cultural heritage bureau of Chang'an district. Their mission was to recover 21 murals, 18 of which were painstakingly removed using a delicate technique to transfer the fragile artworks to the lab, while the three largest murals were carefully packed and moved intact.

"Each mural is a vessel of history, but when we discovered them, they were already severely damaged. The *Picture of Xuan Wu*, in particular, had been shattered into countless pieces by tomb robbers," recalls Jin, 33, who graduated from Northwest University in Xi'an with a master's degree in archaeology.

Xuan Wu, also known as the black tortoise, is a traditional Chinese symbol representing the north and protection. It is often depicted entwined with a snake.

The fragments vary in size and, if not handled carefully during the restoration process, larger fragments may become smaller, and smaller fragments could turn into dust. Therefore, the process of piecing them together requires a significant amount of time and precision.

In the lab, Jin and her colleagues pieced together these fragments. "It's like assembling a massive jigsaw puzzle," Jin says. "We rely on the alignment of lines and shapes, constantly comparing them until the entire picture is re-formed."

But restoration is not only about putting pieces back together. Another challenge lay in removing temporary reinforcements applied during the murals' transport from the tomb to the museum. These materials, meant to protect the murals, had to be carefully scraped away using cutting tools and specialized solvents, ensuring that the murals were not damaged in the process.

The field of mural restoration has evolved significantly, merging traditional craftsmanship with cutting-edge technology. For the Han Xiu's tomb murals, advanced instruments and methods like extended depth of field microscopes, Raman spectroscopy and X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy

Reclaiming history's bigger picture

Mural restorers work on ancient artworks to get clearer understanding of the past, **Qin Feng** and **Chen Nan** report in Xi'an.



A member of the team restores a section on a mural painting at the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an.

“Artifacts are the witnesses of history, and each mural, each object, tells a story that spans thousands of years. Our work ensures that these stories live on, preserving the true memories of the past for future generations.”

Jin Zilin, relics restorer, Shaanxi History Museum

became invaluable tools.

"These devices are like the 'check-up tools' for the murals," Jin explains. "They help us understand the structure, pigment composition and condition of the murals."

Through scientific analysis, the restorers gain crucial insights into the murals, allowing them to craft tailored restoration strategies. For example, during the restoration of the *Yue Wu Tu* mural, or *Picture of Music and Dancing*, spectral analysis revealed that certain patterns had been modified by the original Tang Dynasty artist.

"These changes were part of the original creation process," Jin explains, emphasizing how technology helps uncover the artwork's authentic history.

In addition, the repairers in the

lab carefully select materials and methods through a series of experiments, ensuring they use the most appropriate materials for each restoration. "Even choosing the right adhesive requires extensive testing," Jin adds.

According to Jin, the philosophy of mural restoration is to preserve the mural's integrity. One of the core principles in artifact conservation is the preservation of the original state.

"Our goal is never to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the mural by adding color or lines that weren't part of the original. We restore missing sections with a neutral filler and later refine the overall aesthetic to ensure harmony, but we never paint over or alter the original artwork," Jin says.

This approach prioritizes the integrity of the artifact, ensuring it

remains as close as possible to its original form.

"We want the murals to retain their authentic appearance," Jin says. "This 'authentic protection' respects the mural's historical value, allowing future generations to study the original as it was."

In recent years, the field of artifact restoration has captured public attention, especially through popular TV shows like *National Treasure*, produced by the China Media Group, which showcases national treasures from cultural institutions, and the three-part TV documentary *Masters in the Forbidden City*.

The work of an artifact restoration technician is time-consuming, demanding patience and precision.

"Restoration is a test of one's mental fortitude. Every step requires

complete focus because even the smallest mistake can result in irreversible damage," Jin recalls.

She remembers her early days when the pressure of working with such precious, delicate murals was overwhelming. "But as time went on, I became fascinated by the history embedded in the artwork," she says. "When we finish restoring a mural, I can almost feel the vibrancy of that ancient dynasty, as if we're touching the pulse of a bygone era."

Jin also emphasizes the importance of teamwork. "Our team is primarily made up of young people born in the 1990s, and the atmosphere is great. Restoration is a collective effort, and any mistake at one stage can affect the entire project. Cooperation is key."

Jin is among the 14 female conservators at the Shaanxi History Museum. Their craftsmanship and dedication bring ancient works of art back to life.

The museum has also set up a transparent working area open to the public, showcasing the restoration process.

"Through these exhibitions and interactive activities, we aim to make the public not just spectators but active participants in the preservation of cultural heritage," says Jin. "When I see more and more people taking an interest in our work, I feel both proud and responsible."

Looking to the future, Jin is hopeful. "With advancing technology, we will have even more precise tools to protect our cultural relics," she says. "At the same time, we hope to continue engaging the public through exhibitions and interactive experiences, fostering a greater appreciation for the preservation of cultural heritage."

In early 2024, an exhibition titled *Splendid Tang Dynasty: Archaeological Excavation and Conservation of Murals in Han Xiu's Tomb* was held at the Shaanxi History Museum, showcasing 21 murals from the tomb for the first time.

"These murals cover a range of aspects, from music and dance to daily life and natural scenery, depicting the lifestyles and social landscape of the officials of the Tang Dynasty," said Gao Xiaochao, head of the mural conservation branch department under the museum's protection and restoration department, in an earlier interview. "The murals are valuable works of art, which are also important for historical research. The restoration of the Han Xiu tomb murals is not only a technical feat but also a heartfelt commitment to history."

As Jin puts it, "Artifacts are the witnesses of history, and each mural, each object, tells a story that spans thousands of years. Our work ensures that these stories live on, preserving the true memories of the past for future generations."

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Exhibition focuses on top US photographers framing Chinese culture

LOS ANGELES — A photo exhibition was launched in Southern California from Jan 23 to last Sunday to showcase Chinese culture through the creative lens of award-winning American photographers.

Four Southern Californian photographers took an 11-day journey to South China's Guangdong province last November to explore its essence.

From daily life to traditional celebrations, the photographers visited different cities and experienced Guangdong's vibrant heritage, artistry and culinary delights.

The exhibition, held in South Coast Plaza in Orange County of Southern California, features 48 photos from their creative lens into Guangdong's dynamic culture, including the Yingge Dance, a traditional folk dance that originated from the Chaoshan

area; the enduring kung fu practices in Foshan, a city known for its martial arts culture; and dim sum traditions from humble rural kitchens to upscale dining venues.

"It is a very vibrant place," says Irfan Khan, one of the photographers. "I heard a lot about China before my trip. But when I was there, what I saw was how fast it moves." Khan was part of a winning team of the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news coverage of the 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino.

"The Chinese people are hard-working and open-minded to the world. China has a disciplined culture. The whole society is in very good shape," says Khan.

He says he expects to explore China more in the future, and showcase the Chinese culture and

"I heard a lot about China before my trip. But when I was there, what I saw was how fast it moves."

Irfan Khan, US photographer

tradition to American audiences through his pictures.

Michael Nelson, winner of the US National Press Photographers Association's Best of Photojournalism, says what impressed him most during his China trip were the contrasts and diversity of Chinese culture.

"You see traditional culture, dances, different kinds of people in mountain areas. You also see the very modern, stylish and fast-paced side, like in cities such as Guangzhou. I found the contrasts very interesting. It's important to get a full picture of the country," he says.

Nelson says he hopes the photo exhibition will serve as a platform to bridge understanding between American and Chinese people and to cement bilateral cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

Wang Taiyu, cultural counselor of the Chinese Consulate General in Los Angeles, says the photo exhibition will help American audiences learn more about China, Chinese people's lives and China's development.

XINHUA



Visitors view photos at an exhibition in South Coast Plaza in Orange County, Southern California, featuring 38 photos by American photographers focusing on the culture of Guangdong province. QIU CHEN / XINHUA