

WORLD USA

US-China trade: Deciphering the impact of 'de minimis'

PAGE 6



10th anniversary of Swan Lake adaptation feted LIFE SHANGHAI, PAGE 15



Panda fever

Beloved cubs reflect friendship between Hong Kong, mainland GLOBAL LENS, PAGE 7

CHINA DAILY

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XI'S VISION | HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT

Role of innovation in growth highlighted

Modernization of industrial system will feature on two sessions' agenda

By FAN FEIFEI fanfeifei@chinadaily.com.cn

China's emphasis on cultivating new quality productive forces through scientific and technological innovation, reiterated by President Xi Jinping, will drive industrial upgrades, inject strong impetus into high-quality economic growth and enhance the country's core competitiveness globally amid external uncertainties, said national legislators, political advisers and experts.

Highlighting that fostering new growth drivers has been high on China's development agenda, they called for accelerated efforts to achieve breakthroughs in crucial technologies by investing more in fundamental research and strategic forward-looking fields. They also called for reinforcing the dominant position of enterprises in bolstering technological innovation.

Driving the development of new quality productive forces through sci-tech innovation and modernizing China's industrial system are expected to be in the spotlight when the country's top legislature and top political advisory body meet next week at the annual two sessions.

First put forward by Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, during his inspection tour of Heilongjiang province in September 2023, the term "new quality productive forces" was highlighted at the Central Economic Work Conference in December 2023, and became the subject of the first group study session held by the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee in January 2024.



A content creator in traditional Chinese attire shakes hands with a humanoid robot dressed as Ne Zha — an iconic character in Chinese mythology and the protagonist in the record-breaking Chinese animated film *Ne Zha 2* — at a cultural creativity event in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, on Wednesday. WANG GANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



With innovation playing the leading role, new quality productive forces stand for advanced productivity that is freed from traditional economic growth mode and productivity development paths, features high-tech, high efficiency and high quality, and is in line with the new development philosophy, Xi said at the study session.

The Central Economic Work Conference held in December 2024 urged efforts to make sci-tech innovation drive the development of new quality productive forces and build a modern industrial system. "As a new round of technological revolution and industrial transformation is evolving, promoting the deeper integration of digital technologies with the real economy is a necessary requirement for establishing a modern industrial system and an important engine accelerating the development of new quality productive forces," said Qu Yongyi, Party secretary of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Industrial Economics.

Qu, who is also a member of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, stressed the cultivation of strategic emerging industries and future-oriented industries as they play a pivotal role in propelling the development of new quality productive forces. These industries mainly include new-generation information technology, artificial intelligence, new energy, new materials, high-end equipment manufacturing, biomedicine and quantum technology.

See *Innovation*, page 3

EU vows swift, firm response to US tariff policy

By CHEN WEIHUA in Brussels chenweihua@chinadaily.com.cn

The European Union has pushed back against US President Donald Trump's threat to impose 25 percent tariffs on the bloc's exports to the United States, as well as his accusation that the 27-nation bloc was out to get the US.

Speaking to reporters after chairing his first Cabinet meeting at the White House on Wednesday, Trump said, "We have made a decision and we'll be announcing it very soon, and it'll be 25 percent, generally speaking, and that'll be on cars, and all of the things."

The spokesperson repeated his longstanding criticism that Europe had been taking advantage of the US. "They don't accept our cars. They don't accept essentially our farm products. And we accept everything from them."

He also alleged that the EU was established to "screw" the US.

"Look, let's be honest, the European Union was formed in order to screw the United States. That's the purpose of it, and they've done a good job of it. But now I'm president," he said.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, quickly responded with strong messages.

"The EU will react firmly and immediately against unjustified barriers to free and fair trade, including when tariffs are used to challenge legal and nondiscriminatory policies," a commission spokesperson said.

The spokesperson described the EU as "a boon" for the US, adding that the EU single market "has facilitated trade, reduced costs for US exporters, and harmonized standards and regulations across 27 countries."

According to the Office of the US Trade Representative, US total goods trade with the EU was estimated at \$975.9 billion last year, with EU exports to the US hitting \$605.8 billion, pushing up the trade surplus by 12.9 percent over the previous year.

A Bloomberg report said Trump's tariffs could hit as much as \$29.3 billion of EU exports.

Trump's threat followed French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Washington, where he sought to persuade Trump to support Ukraine and exempt the EU from tariff wars.

On Wednesday, Macron briefed EU leaders via a video conference on his meeting with Trump. He also held talks with Friedrich Merz, the likely next German chancellor, in Paris.

German carmakers have been struggling to cope with potential US punitive tariffs. Mercedes-Benz and Audi have both talked about expanding their output in North America to shield themselves from the tariffs.

Commenting on the latest developments, former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt said Trump "has a seriously distorted view of history".

"Now he claims the EU was set up 'to screw the United States'. It was actually set up to prevent war on the European continent," Bildt wrote on X.

Brad Setser, a senior fellow at the New York-based think tank Council on Foreign Relations, warned that Trump's tariffs could cause chaos for US pharmaceutical companies.

"If the tariff on the EU is going to be 25 percent — as Donald Trump suggested today — I will enjoy seeing the frantic efforts by US pharmaceutical companies to find a way around the new import tax," he wrote on X.

EU leaders meeting on March 6 for an emergency summit are expected to focus on Ukraine, but are now likely to talk about the tariffs, too.

The bloc's foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas, who visited Washington on Wednesday and Thursday, was told that she would not meet US Secretary of State Marco Rubio "due to scheduling issues", according to a European Commission spokesperson.

Leaders including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have not publicly commented on the tariffs. The commission presented its Clean Industrial Deal on Wednesday, a plan aimed at supporting the competitiveness and resilience of the EU industry.

"The deal will accelerate decarbonization while securing the future of manufacturing in Europe," the commission said.

Inside

- See more, pages 6, 8
• Editorial, page 11
• Comment, page 12
• Global Views, page 13

Final swap



A bus carrying Palestinian prisoners released as part of the seventh hostage-prisoner swap arrives in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank on Thursday. Israel released 596 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the bodies of four hostages. ZAIN JAAFAR / AFP

MERCHANDISE, SMALL PLAYERS SWEEP UP IN NE ZHA 2'S WHIRLWIND SUCCESS

Box office smash proof of local animation industry's prowess, country's formidable culture

By LIU YUKUN liuyukun@chinadaily.com.cn

The China-made animated hit *Ne Zha 2* exploded onto screens with the force of a "demon child" during the Chinese New Year, raking in a staggering 14 billion yuan (\$1.9 billion) at the global box office.

The unprecedented success of the domestically made film boosted its production company's stock by a



jaw-dropping 260 percent in eight trading days, and propelled sales of associated merchandise beyond 500 million yuan, sending factory operations into overtime to meet the booming demand.

The film has sent a ripple through the entire film industry, showcasing the synergy between profitable intellectual property and the infusion of capital.

From the Sichuan-accented exclamation of Taoist immortal Taiyi Zhenren's "Bashi de ban!" (How delightful!) to the grandeur of the East Sea Dragon Palace, *Ne Zha 2* is a daring cultural reimagining.

See *Ne Zha*, page 2

WORLD WATCH

Advancing a multipolar world order

By Zulkafil Hassan Khan

The Munich Security Conference 2025's main theme — "multipolarization" — clearly projected the demise of the United States' unipolarity. Even the pre-summit report of the conference organizers reaffirmed this paradigm shift, demonstrating how world power politics was diffusing into a greater number of players. The report consolidated different perspectives on global issues, promoting multipolarization, which should be deemed a healthy, productive and positive trend for the international community.

The international community has already suffered due to a single global sovereign, namely the US, leading the world toward chaos and uncertainty, and causing divide, destruction and collateral damage in the process.

On the other hand, China's foreign, economic and social policies stand for collectivism, constructivism, prosperity, dignity and a transparent trading system that benefits all. With China's rise, the US-led post-Cold War unipolarity has been dashed to the ground.

It is good that the US seems to be realizing the folly of some of its foreign policies and is trying to chart a different course.

Thus, the administration of President Donald Trump is seeking an exit strategy from the conflict in Ukraine amid high costs and diminishing strategic gains, as the involvement has badly hurt the US economy.

The Munich Security Conference, held from Feb 14 to 16, revealed the weaknesses of the West when it came to supporting a new socio-economic domain, geopolitical landscape and geostrategic cushion to shape global affairs.

The US response to multipolarity has leaned toward traditional power balancing. However, other global stakeholders have long advocated a different kind of global order rooted in multilateralism, peaceful coexistence and economic interdependence.

For instance, BRICS has integrated large chunks of Asia and Africa into a dynamic economic powerhouse promoting real economic globalization, negating the notions of protectionism and "America First".

See *Conference*, page 3



INSIDE Time to break free of dependency Global Views, page 13

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PAGE TWO

Ne Zha: Super IP ignites animation merchandise market



A figurine of a main character Ao Bing in *Ne Zha 2* for sale at a Pop Mart store in Beijing on Tuesday.
ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

From page 1

On-screen, the film's protagonist defiantly declares, "If there's no path ahead, I'll carve one!" Off-screen, a coalition of 138 Chinese animation studios, ranging from industry giants to obscure contributors, united to chart a new path for Chinese animation.

Director Yang Yu, better known as Jiaozi, said that while international companies were initially considered to produce the movie's visual special effects, they fell short of expectations. "We instead opted to entrust local teams with refining the work," he said.

In Jiangxi province, Huanying Fengbao (Miragevfx) studio spent three months crafting the ethereal Yu Xu Palace dome effects, which include intricate circular patterns and the mesmerizing nectar water animations. The average age of the young animation team was 25.

In Shenzhen, Guangdong province, Fantawild Animation took the same amount of time to perfect the waterfall effects for a forest skirmish scene. To tackle the intricate scene, the animation team streamlined its workflows, used 50 high-performance workstations as a computational cluster, and conducted batch processing of simulation data.

"Each frame demanded 32 hours for rendering, totaling 15 days. Our aim was not just grandeur, but a rhythmic, aesthetically Eastern cascade," team leader Wang Weiwei said.

In an interview with CCTV, Jiaozi stressed: "We must craft visuals that astonish, that break new ground artistically and captivate aesthetically. Only then does the endeavor hold merit."

Awestruck audiences

This relentless pursuit of technical excellence left Wang Zheng, general manager of Mianyang Zhonghuan Culture Communications, a company that owns 10 cinemas, awestruck.

"Many viewers revisited the film to dissect fleeting visual effect moments," said Wang.

Before many screenings, tickets sold out within minutes. Some impatient international fans even went to nearby countries to watch the film.

In addition, hordes of fans



Clockwise from top left: A painter introduces her Ne Zha-themed graffiti to a visitor in Shijiazhuang, Hebei province, on Feb 19. CHEN QIBAO / FOR CHINA DAILY A Ne Zha series of blind box figurines for sale at a Pop Mart store in Beijing on Tuesday. ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY Workers produce Ne Zha-themed action figures in Xiangtan, Hunan province, on Feb 8. CHEN SIHAN / XINHUA Ne Zha-themed keychain products are sold at a store in Dongguan, Guangdong province, on Feb 17. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

of the movie traveled to real-world Ne Zha landmarks such as Tianjin's Chentang Pass and Yibin's Ne Zha Temple — rekindling interest in cultural tourism.

Zhang Feng from Beijing displayed a clutch of different ticket stubs for the film to illustrate his appreciation for different aspects of *Ne Zha 2*'s high-end production value.

"IMAX 3D for its visual splendor, Dolby Atmos for musical immersion, 4DX for the 'wind-fire wheels' thrill," he said.

At the peak of *Ne Zha 2*'s box office reign, Zhonghuan cinemas scheduled up to 140 daily screenings, Wang said. The off-peak cinema occupancy rate hovered at 50 to 60 percent while prime-time screenings were sold out.

The film accounted for 80 percent of Zhonghuan cinemas' daily box office earnings, he said.

"Our scheduling hinges on demand, occupancy, and revenue — *Ne Zha 2* dominated on all fronts," he added.

"Although the average attendance rate for *Ne Zha 2* dropped by 50 percent one month after its release, this still stands as a commendable achievement. This data not only reflects remarkably well on the domestic market, but also showcases a favorable

decline rate when compared with imported animation films."

Wang said imported animation films often face a situation where, after one month, many theaters have either stopped screening them or only have occasional showings. "In contrast, *Ne Zha 2* continues to be prioritized by theaters as a leading feature for screening," he said.

Go local, win global

As audiences wept during the movie's heart-touching scenes, investors rejoiced in its financial fortunes.

Ne Zha 2 boasted five production companies — three affiliated with Enlight Media and two linked to Jiaozi, information from data analysis company Beacon Pro showed.

With a reported budget of 500 million yuan, which included production and marketing, industry insiders estimated that Enlight could reap over 2 billion yuan from a 10 billion yuan box office haul. After Spring Festival, Enlight's shares surged, adding a remarkable 72 billion yuan to achieve a 100 billion-yuan market value.

Professor Chen Shaofeng from Peking University, also a former independent director at Enlight Media, hailed the film as a watershed moment in animation commercialization. "China's director-centric model diverges from Hollywood's producer-driven paradigm, yet recent market shifts offer enhanced protection for investor returns," Chen said.

In the end credits, *Ne Zha 2* recognized 135 companies in various categories such as co-production, production teams, art services, digital assets, visual production, and animation production. Of these enterprises, 115 were classified as small and micro-sized ones.

"The nature of outsourced work in this specific visual effect field dictates the absence of large enterprises," Chen said.

"As entities that do not participate in film investment but solely engage in production, outsourced parties have minimal connection to the post-film profits. It is truly the combined efforts — which come from the enthusiasm for the animation industry of

these participating companies — that have propelled the film forward, paving the way for a more mature development of Chinese animation," he said.

Sales of products associated with *Ne Zha 2* have shone as brightly as the film itself.

"Almost all the goods that were brought in were sold out well before the second day of the Chinese New Year," said Wang of Mianyang Zhonghuan. "The daily sales revenue of *Ne Zha 2* products accounted for approximately 20 to 30 percent of the cinema's non-ticket revenue."

He added that there had been some product supply shortages, mainly due to inadequate forecasts of demand for the products, a situation that was compounded by logistical issues during Spring Festival.

Sales of authorized *Ne Zha* series merchandise on Taobao's platform have surpassed 50 million yuan, according to data from the online retailer. The range of products includes blind boxes, trading cards, plush toys, resin dolls, film cards, fridge magnets, badges, stickers and dozens of other items, with sales continuing to grow.

On Jan 30, Pop Mart released the *Ne Zha*-themed series of blind box figurines on its Tmall official store. With over 20,000 people searching online daily, the sales quickly exceeded tens of millions of yuan within eight days of the launch, becoming a hard-to-find item.

Qin Lang, who is in charge of trendy toys at Tmall, said the blind boxes are restocked irregularly, and daily inquiries from fans are still high.

At the Pop Mart store in Sanlitun, Beijing, the display case for the *Ne Zha* series of blind box figurines had a "sold out" sign recently. This series of blind box figurines includes eight regular designs and one hidden design, with a single item priced at 69 yuan and the full set at 552 yuan. Staff members said that only display items were available in the store, and restocking times are uncertain.

Official stores of the card game company Card.Fun have introduced new trading cards for the *Ne Zha* series. In just one week, over 700,000 cards in the series were sold, surpassing 1 million yuan in total sales. The limited-edition "Jiaozi director autographed" cards have become a favorite with collectors.

"The growth in searches and transactions for *Ne Zha 2*-related products is explosive, with over 100,000 more searches per day compared with the previous day. This kind of surge in sales for intellectual property merchandise is very rare in recent years. As the hottest IP of the year, we expect that this 'Ne Zha whirlwind' will continue for at least another month," said Qin from Tmall.

IP protection

In Yiwu's small-commodity market in Zhejiang province, an "unofficial merchandise" scene is unfolding. Merchant Chen Jianguo was proud to show "his achievements": He had replicated the Ao Bing mask in three hours, and the first 5,000 sold out within 48 hours.

"The official version sells for 199 yuan? My version is only 19.9 yuan with free shipping!" he said.

While Chen is proud of his product, the rampant growth in unauthorized products is causing headaches for copyright holders.

The challenges associated with merchandise piracy underscore the fragility of China's domestic animation industry. Despite advances in technical collaboration and product development, the Chinese animation sector still has ground to cover before achieving a "Disney-style ecosystem," said Chen Shaofeng from Peking University.

"For instance, Disney typically kick-starts IP development a year before a movie's release, supported by a robust legal team specializing in intellectual property," he said.

"They also strategically map out theme park expansions tied to their IPs. In the world of IP economics, box office earnings may only represent roughly 38 percent, with derivatives and theme parks occupying a major share of total profits, signaling a need for Chinese production teams to sharpen their focus on IP profitability," he said.

Meanwhile, locales associated with *Ne Zha*, like Yibin and Jiangyou, are steadily gaining prominence on the back of the movie's success. The hashtag #MultiplePlaces-CompetingforNeZhaIP# has trended across various social platforms.

Data from the online travel service Fliggy showed a notable surge in searches for *Ne Zha*-related destinations in the past week, with Yibin witnessing a 225 percent spike and Jiangyou skyrocketing by 453 percent. Searches for attractions such as the *Ne Zha* Nao Hai Water Park and *Ne Zha* Town have also experienced a significant upswing.

Ne Zha 2 has showcased the formidable impact of a top-tier IP. Nonetheless, as the hero's "My fate is determined by me, not by heaven" ethos resonates with audiences, the Chinese entertainment industry is considering how to ensure it is not a one-off success.

"Chinese filmmakers should embrace an industrialized system and hold content in reverence," Chen Shaofeng said.



Figurines of "Demon child" Ne Zha sold by Pop Mart, a leading trend toy maker. PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

TOP NEWS

Spokesman:
Navy did not
violate any law

Groundless accusations and deliberate hype on operations by Chinese vessels rebutted

By JIANG CHENGLONG
jiangchenglong@chinadaily.com.cn

The recent operations of the Chinese naval fleet in international waters near Australia fully comply with international law, a spokesman for the Ministry of National Defense said on Thursday.

Senior Colonel Wu Qian made the remark at a regular news conference in Beijing, responding to what he earlier called Australia's groundless accusations and deliberate hype regarding the operations of the People's Liberation Army.

According to media reports, a Chinese frigate, destroyer and supply vessel have recently been operating in international waters approximately 150 nautical miles off Australia's coast, conducting exercises. Australia has accused China of lacking transparency, and the Australian air traffic control agency has issued reminders, leading some airlines to adjust their flight plans.

However, both Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and New Zealand's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon acknowledged that China acted in accordance with international law, according to a Reuters report.

"We have also noted that both Australia and New Zealand have repeatedly stated that China's actions are entirely in accordance with international law. I believe that such statements themselves are very telling," Wu said.

In his first response on Sunday to Australia's accusations, Wu said that China was "deeply surprised and strongly dissatisfied".

"The Australian side's remarks are completely inconsistent with the facts," Wu said. "The Chinese naval fleet conducted exercises within international waters far from the Australian coastline. During this period, China repeatedly issued safety notices in advance and organized live-fire naval gun training at sea."

Wu called on Australia to view bilateral and military relations with China "objectively and rationally, as well as with more sincerity and professionalism, and take concrete actions to contribute to the stable development" of bilateral ties.

Zhang Junshe, a former researcher at the PLA's Naval Research Academy, said that Australia's reaction indicated unease over China's naval exercises in international waters. He said that Australia's response hyped up the so-called "China threat theory", which aims to deter the Chinese navy from venturing into the open seas.

"The United States and its allies,

The Australian side's remarks are completely inconsistent with the facts. The Chinese naval fleet conducted exercises within international waters far from the Australian coastline. During this period, China repeatedly issued safety notices in advance and organized live-fire naval gun training at sea."

Wu Qian,
Defense Ministry spokesman

including Australia, have been conducting joint military exercises in the South China Sea and East China Sea for many years, with a large number of forces and high intensity," Zhang said.

Emphasizing that the nature of the Chinese naval fleet's navigation in international waters is entirely different from an intrusion of Australian military aircraft into China's airspace over the Xisha Islands, Zhang said: "According to international law, a military aircraft of one country has no right to fly over the airspace of another country without permission. Such actions must be approved or consented to by the country concerned."

Earlier this month, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun accused an Australian military aircraft of deliberately intruding on Feb 11 into China's airspace over the Xisha Islands in the South China Sea, infringing on China's sovereignty and endangering national security.

China's actions to expel the Australian aircraft were justified, lawful, professional and restrained, Guo said at a daily news conference on Feb 13, adding that China has lodged solemn representations with Australia, demanding that it stop its infringement and provocations and cease undermining peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Zhang also noted that the US and its allies, including Australia, routinely engage in such military operations while criticizing China's normal training activities.

Boat
to safety

Residents use a wooden boat to navigate a flooded road on Wednesday after heavy rain in Bandung, west Java, Indonesia. At least 233 residents of Bandung remain displaced due to flooding in their homes, the local government said.

TIMUR MATAHARI / AFP

Innovation: SMEs play key role in tech application

From page 1

Qu said more efforts are needed to increase investments in core technologies in key fields and solve bottleneck issues in areas such as raw material, critical components, core equipment and basic software, to boost the nation's self-reliance and strength in science and technology and gain an edge in an increasingly competitive international scenario.

Huang Hanquan, head of the Chinese Academy of Macroeconomic Research, underscored the importance of giving full play to the role of enterprises, especially small and medium-sized ones, in bolstering sci-tech innovation, speeding up the industrial application of innovation achievements and strengthening the training of high-caliber talent.

Stating that sci-tech innovation is key to cultivating new quality productive forces, Huang said that more measures should be taken to deepen reforms in fields such as technology and education to create a favorable environment that encourages innovation. These include expansion of international cooperation and exchanges in sci-tech, support for foreign enterprises

in carrying out technological research and innovative practices in collaboration with Chinese research institutes and companies.

"China's new economic growth drivers come from industrial transformation and upgrades as well as technological innovation. By giving play to the leading role of enterprises in bolstering sci-tech innovation as well as stimulating their innovation vitality, the country could speed up the formation of sound institutions and mechanisms for fostering new quality productive forces," said Li Dongsheng, founder and chairman of Chinese consumer electronics maker TCL Technology Group Corp.

Chinese enterprises should enhance independent innovation capacities and pour more capital into core technologies, said Li, who is also a deputy to the 14th National People's Congress, adding that his company has invested more than 60 billion yuan (\$8.3 billion) in research and development in the past six years, and achieved breakthroughs in key technologies such as next-generation display technologies, new energy, photovoltaics and materials.

Jia Shaoqian, chairman of Chinese home appliance manufacturer

Hisense Group, said the country's continued efforts to nurture new quality productive forces are conducive to promoting the high-end, intelligent and green transformation of the manufacturing sector, while calling for more efforts to step up capital support for enterprises' technological innovation projects.

Jia, who is also a deputy to the 14th NPC, said Hisense is ratcheting up resources to make innovations and breakthroughs in cutting-edge laser display technologies, while expanding its presence in new sectors such as integrated circuits, smart cities, intelligent transportation, optical communication and automotive electronics.

In recent years, the country's strength in sci-tech innovation has taken a major leap. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, China has moved up to 11th place in the rankings of the world's most innovative economies and remains the only middle-income economy in the top 30.

The country is home to 26 of the world's top 100 sci-tech innovation clusters, maintaining its position as the global leader for two consecutive years, based on the WIPO's Global Innovation Index 2024.

Zhou Hongyi, founder and chairman of Chinese internet enterprise 360 Security Group, and a member of the 14th National Committee of the CPPCC, said building a modern industrial system is key to improving the country's economic strength.

Looking ahead, the growth potential of the country's economy will come from industrial upgrades driven by technological innovation, while generative AI technology represented by large language models will give birth to new production and business models in traditional fields including manufacturing, agriculture and services, and create more social value, Zhou added.

"Technology and innovation are key to bringing disruptive changes to the Chinese economy. We have seen China leapfrogging in some new areas such as electric vehicles, energy storage, aerospace, solar photovoltaics and wind energy," said Denis Depoux, global managing director of market consultancy Roland Berger.

China has emerged as a strong player in the global R&D landscape, he said, adding foreign enterprises have been and will hopefully remain a key contributor to the country's industrial modernization drive.

Conference: Paradigm shift indicates end of unipolarity

From page 1

China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and regional frameworks led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have become iconic platforms for sustained economic cooperation, joint safety and security efforts, energy and food security and peaceful conflict resolution, implementing and replicating the "Shanghai Spirit" for resolving conflicts through dialogue, diplomacy and development.

China's advocacy for multipolarity is also deeply rooted in its centuries-old governance principles.

The Chinese wisdom reflects principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, which emerged from the Bandung Conference in 1955, advocating for sovereignty and self-determination beyond Cold War bipolarity.

The theme of this year's Munich

Security Conference honored the ancient Chinese wisdom of collectiveness, respect and service to humanity.

It appears that the Western security architecture has lost its relevance and credibility. Russian President Vladimir Putin's past warnings and predictions about the misuse of unipolarity, NATO's eastern expansion, and Western unilateral interventions in different parts of the world resonated amid the demise of international law and decline of principles of civilized international diplomacy.

The security conference has become a giant step toward the Western recognition of "multipolarization" in the world, which is timely.

Unfortunately, the responses of some Western politicians and policymakers have been colored by personal prejudices, greedy preferences and irrational preferential policies,

and they are reluctant to accept the bitter ground realities that call for flexibility and adaptability.

The European leadership appears confused, still trying to deny the imminent change with traditional great power competition.

Western countries should acknowledge the new reality of multipolarity which seems to be real, effective, emerging and paramount, and immediately discontinue their wrong strategies of containment and competition and jointly work for win-win situations and mutually beneficial propositions.

Policymakers of the US should realize that Washington's global dominance is over, with new actors in the world discarding a single sovereign power and initiating a new world order based on the Chinese principles of respecting sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful coexistence, multiculturalism,

cooperation, transparency and constructive engagement.

The keynote speech of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the security conference rightly showcased the strategic importance of multipolarization. Wang rightly named China the main proponent of multipolarity, negating rivalry with the US and Europe and emphasizing the need for cooperation.

The Chinese concept of multipolarity stands for equality and inclusiveness, economic globalization and international cooperation, appealing to all countries and communities to jointly work for an open, better, peaceful and prosperous world.

The author is director of the Center for South Asia & International Studies, a nongovernmental organization based in Islamabad, Pakistan. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Quake-hit Dingri ready for new year, new homes

By PALDEN NYIMA
and DAQJONG in Lhasa

On the eve of Losar, the Tibetan New Year, the people of Dingri county in the Xizang autonomous region have more than one reason to celebrate.

While the start of a new year is associated with festivities, fun and fortune, villagers in Dingri, which was rocked by a magnitude 6.8 earthquake on Jan 7, can also look forward to embracing the warmth of new homes.

A project to reconstruct houses damaged in the powerful quake and its multiple aftershocks is scheduled to start in March and completed swiftly by October, giving the community hope for making a fresh start before the end of the year.

Drolma Tsering, a resident of Drakchang village in Dingri, said she was thrilled to hear the news about the government's expedited reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, adding that she and her fellow villagers are eager to leave the past behind.

Drakchang was one of the 27

villages in Dingri severely affected by the quake. Wang Xinli, deputy head of the county's bureau of housing and urban-rural development, confirmed the reconstruction plan.

"Depending on the number of members, each family will get a house measuring 80 square meters to 260 sq m. Other basic infrastructure, such as schools for young children and health clinics, have also been planned," Wang said.

Around 5,000 villagers, who have been living in makeshift tents in Dingri's Tsogo township since the January quake, are preparing to celebrate Losar. They have received daily necessities and festive packages from the authorities, and have rehearsed traditional songs and dances to usher in the new year.

"We've done our best to ensure that the people have enough food, water and electricity to stay warm and enjoy the Tibetan New Year," said Ngakwang Tenzin, head of Tsogo township.

He said that special assistance is being provided to the elderly, children

and others in need, and teachers have been arranged to support students preparing for the new semester.

"The first Losar after the earthquake is of great importance to all of us, as it offers a chance to reset and marks a new mission and a fresh start," he added.

Meanwhile, in Lhasa, the capital of Xizang, preparations for Losar, which falls on Friday and marks the start of Year of the Wood Snake in the Tibetan calendar, are in high gear.

Locals are thronging markets to make purchases for the celebrations, which usually go on for 15 days. Stalls selling dried yak meat, yak butter, handmade pastries, candies, dried fruits and prayer flags have mushroomed everywhere.

The Barkhor market, which is said to be the best place to soak up Lhasa vibes, was packed with shoppers eager to clinch a good deal during the monthlong annual Losar shopping festival, featuring 213 stalls, which ended on Thursday.

"Despite the presence of other mar-

kets, Barkhor remains a popular spot for its vibrant atmosphere and diverse offerings," Champa Tsering, who is in charge of the market, was quoted as saying by Xizang Commerce Daily.

This year, the Losar shopping festival highlighted an exhibition and sale of imported goods, attracting 30 merchants from South and West Asia. Exotic items such as handwoven Nepali carpets and traditional Bhutanese handicrafts were up for grabs during the event.

Losar is celebrated on different days in different parts of Xizang due to variations in altitude and harvesting season.

While most people celebrate Losar on the first day of the first month in the Tibetan calendar, residents in parts of Shigatse and Nagchu celebrate it at the start of the 12th month, some in Ngari celebrate it in the 11th month, and people in eastern Nyingchi mark it as early as in the 10th month.

As 2025 marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Xizang autonomous region, the flourishing



A man looks at a peacock feather fan while shopping for the upcoming Tibetan New Year at the Barkhor Shopping Mall in Lhasa, Xizang autonomous region, on Feb 21. PALDEN NYIMA / CHINA DAILY

Losar economy marks a milestone in Xizang's remarkable transformation over the years.

Chungdak, a resident of Lhasa and owner of a traditional Tibetan pastry shop, said he has been doing brisk business for weeks in the run-up to the New Year, and his *kasai*, or handmade pastries, are almost sold out. "In the old days, people like me

mainly prepared basic pastry varieties, but now we need to make more, because more people are buying and they want more options," he added.

Sonam Gyatso, a 70-year-old resident, agreed. "The choices are many, and we can buy whatever we want."

Contact the writers at
palden_nyima@chinadaily.com.cn

CHINA

Spring harmony

A boy interacts with a seagull as a flock circles a crowd at Zhanqiao Pier in Qingdao, Shandong province, on Thursday. As temperatures rise, people have been coming outdoors to enjoy the warmth of spring. Seagulls often gather at the pier, eating treats from the hands of tourists and some bold ones even perching on the shoulders of visitors, creating an ecological scene of harmonious coexistence between human and seagulls. WANG PEIKE / DAZHONG DAILY



Three rural women in Shandong inspire millions

By ZHAO RUIXUE in Jinan
zhaoruixue@chinadaily.com.cn

In rural Shandong province, three women are challenging stereotypes and inspiring millions with their talents and determination to carve out different paths. Their stories, widely shared on social media, reflect the changing landscape of rural China.

Li Xiaoxia, a 57-year-old retired English teacher in the county-level city of Zhaoyuan, has embraced her new role as an apple farmer.

Dressed in a black down jacket and a red scarf, she stands in her orchard, a picture of rural simplicity. But when she speaks, her fluent English reveals another side of her.

"We do hope to share our delicious apples with you," she said in English in a promotional video that quickly garnered thousands of likes.

Li began farming after retirement, drawn by her passion for rural life and a desire to contribute to her hometown's renowned apple industry. She and her family now cultivate a 100-hectare orchard.

"I grew up in the countryside, and I love the land so much," she said.

Her dedication to modern farming techniques, including integrated water-fertilization systems, has made her orchard a regional model for high-quality development.

Faced with a surplus of apples last year, Li turned to social media. With help from her niece, she created short videos in English that went viral, attracting more than 240,000 followers. Now, she livestreams regularly, sometimes selling more than 400 boxes of apples in a single day.

"In addition to promoting apples, I also want to introduce other products from my hometown and contribute to its development," she said.

Bun seller to internet star

Wang Xia, a 40-year-old steamed bun shop owner in Qufu, has also become an online sensation by combining her daily work with her passion for English.

Unlike Li, who has years of experience speaking English, Wang began learning the language from scratch last September to set a good example for her son, who was struggling with the subject in junior middle school.

When she started sharing her

progress on social media, she quickly gained a following of 17,000 people.

"I'm 40 years old, a middle school graduate, and I've been selling steamed buns in a small rural town for five years. Thank you all for your support," she says often at the start of her videos as she greets her fans in English.

Despite working long hours at her shop, Wang squeezes in study time on her mobile phone, using translation and AI applications. Her videos document her progress from struggling with "broken English" to expressing herself more fluently, earning her a loyal audience. Some followers have even traveled to her town to try her steamed buns, boosting her business.

However, her journey has sparked controversy online. When she announced plans to take the IELTS exam in 10 years and study abroad, many questioned whether it was realistic.

"The point is that I'm doing it. If I can do it, anyone can," she says, adding that it is possible to break away from traditional life paths.

"I want to be a role model for my kids," she says. "And for other people

in rural areas who think it's too late to change, I want to show them that we can always improve and keep growing."

From fruit farmer to poet

Lyu Yuxia, a 52-year-old fruit farmer from Mengyin county, has earned fame as a rural Chinese poet. Her poems in Chinese, inspired by daily life and the natural beauty of her surroundings, have drawn a following of 600,000 on social media.

"In my childhood, my father, a rural teacher, loved telling me history stories and poems while doing farm work. I enjoyed listening to him very much," Lyu said.

"I love writing and have kept several diaries," she added.

Two years ago, Lyu posted a poem about a picturesque rural scene on a social media platform, garnering 9 million views. Encouraged by her son, she began sharing her work online.

"Our hometown is getting more beautiful as the government pushes for rural revitalization. I hope more people learn about our hometown, its natural scenery and the peaches we grow," she said.

Lost cave divers rescued after 69-hour operation

By SHI RUIPENG and ZHANG LI in Nanning and CHEN MEILING

For 27-year-old Zhou Yuanpeng (pseudonym), a university researcher studying cave-dwelling fish, what began as a routine scientific expedition became a life-threatening ordeal which ultimately turned into a testament to human resilience and China's evolving cave-diving rescue capabilities.

On Feb 5, Zhou and four teammates from an aquatic cave biodiversity survey team ventured into a karst cave in Na'e village in Baise, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. They dove to photograph rare cave fish and shrimp in their natural habitat.

As night fell, Zhou and another researcher, an older man also surnamed Zhou, became trapped in the labyrinthine underwater passages and lost contact with their teammates. Their colleagues alerted authorities, triggering a 69-hour rescue operation involving 13 divers, firefighters and medical teams.

The cave, located at the source of the Huowang River, initially appears as a large hall but narrows deeper inside. It contains air chambers — spaces where the rock walls curve upward like an upside-down basin, with water below and pockets of trapped air above — according to Liang Liang, deputy chief of Baise's urban patrol police.

"It's a geological maze with interwoven folds, faults and underground rivers," Liang said. "The complex environment was unknown to us, which was the biggest challenge."

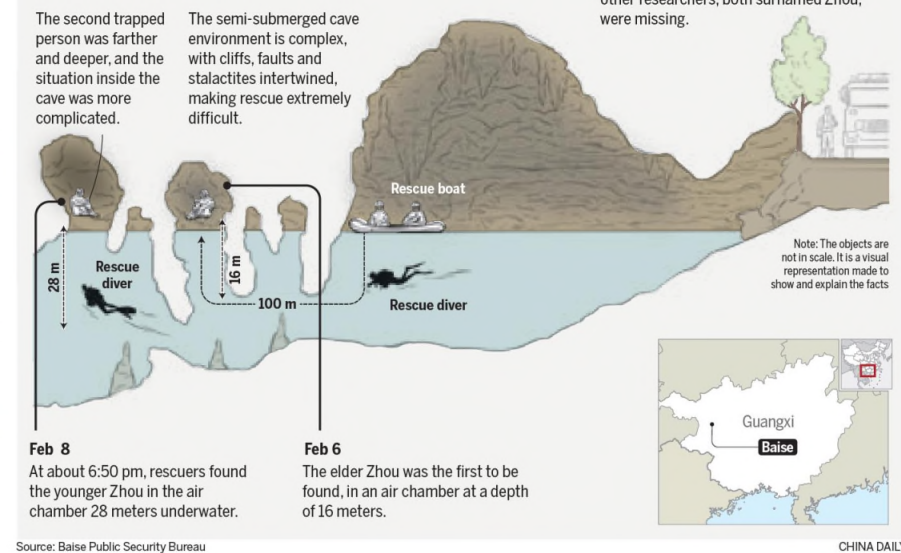
With water depths reaching more than 30 meters, rescuers used five 200-meter reels to navigate the murky waters with guide ropes, where visibility was limited to just 3 meters.

At first, rescuers only heard faint tapping sounds from the trapped researchers.

After more than four hours of underwater searching, the first survivor, the elder Zhou, was found at 4:30 am on Feb 6, trapped in an air

A SUCCESSFUL CAVE DIVING RESCUE

After 69 hours of joint search and rescue efforts by workers from Guangxi public security and other departments, two missing people were successfully rescued.



Source: Baise Public Security Bureau

chamber 16 meters below the surface and 300 meters from the cave's entrance. He was brought out 90 minutes later.

But the younger Zhou remained missing. Xu Shide, a diver with the Baise public security bureau's water rescue team, said the first survivor was found closer to the cave entrance. But Zhou Yuanpeng was trapped much deeper, forcing rescuers to search multiple chambers.

Over the next three days, divers conducted more than a dozen exhausting dives, battling strong currents and jagged limestone formations.

"Our physical and mental strength were at their limits, but no one gave up," said Wu Xinghao, a member of the rescue team.

Finally, at 6:50 pm on Feb 8, they found the younger Zhou in an air chamber 28 meters deep and 500 meters from the entrance.

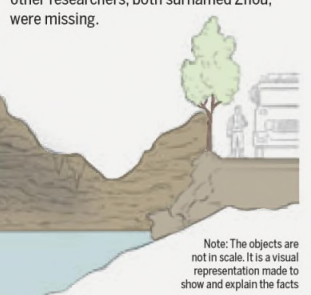
Zhou Yuanpeng was so weak after three days without food that he could barely respond, Wu said. Wu stayed with him, talking to keep him conscious, while Xu retrieved scuba tanks, diving equipment and glucose.

Once Zhou Yuanpeng regained some strength, he and the rescuers began their exit. The narrow, complex passageways made pulling him out impossible, so he had to swim out. Weak and exhausted, Zhou Yuanpeng said he hallucinated as his hope faded. "I believed those were my final moments."

The mission marked China's first successful cave-diving rescue.

Feb 5

A comprehensive scientific investigation team dove into the cave. When the team members returned, they found that two other researchers, both surnamed Zhou, were missing.



Feb 6

The elder Zhou was the first to be found, in an air chamber at a depth of 16 meters.

Feb 8

At about 6:50 pm, rescuers found the younger Zhou in the air chamber 28 meters deep and 500 meters from the entrance.

"The team was professional, with cave rescue skills and advanced equipment," said Tang Junwen, a veteran cave diver. "Plus, these caves weren't completely enclosed, allowing trapped divers to find air pockets."

Tang said survival chances plummeted after 60 hours without contact. "This case is very inspiring and offers valuable experience."

Wei Bai, a member of World Underwater Discovery and a domestic expert in cave diving, helped formulate the rescue plan and described the mission as exceptionally challenging.

"Our operation this time finally shifted from recovering bodies to rescuing survivors," he said.

Contact the writers at chenmeiling@chinadaily.com.cn

Principals to keep tabs on meal services

Ministry calls for enhanced oversight to improve food safety in school canteens

By CHINA DAILY

The Ministry of Education has pledged to intensify efforts to improve food safety and meal budget management in schools offering meal services, placing primary responsibility on school principals.

Speaking at a meeting on food safety and meal expense management in primary and secondary schools, a ministry official emphasized that principals must conduct on-site meetings in school canteens, dine with students at the beginning of each semester, and solicit feedback from students and parents on food safety issues every semester.

The ministry is also calling for stricter oversight of food ingredient procurement, delivery, inspection, storage and processing, as well as more standardized management of food services and expenses. It seeks to strengthen the prevention of food safety risks.

To enhance oversight, the ministry requires schools to maintain open channels for teachers and students to report food safety complaints and to establish parent supervision committees for food safety.

Increased investment is also mandated to upgrade school canteen facilities, enhance personnel training, promote the digitalization of food safety campaigns, and improve emergency plans and risk perception systems.

These measures build on the ministry's ongoing efforts to improve food safety and budget management in 167,300 primary and secondary schools nationwide that provide meal services, representing 70.75 percent of all such schools.

In November last year, the ministry issued guidelines specifying responsibilities for schools and education departments, standard operating procedures, and requirements for canteen layouts and equipment.

According to China Central Television, since a nationwide campaign launched in May 2024 to address school food safety and budget management issues, 103 billion yuan (\$14 billion) has been invested in improving school canteens. The proportion of schools with internet-enabled transparent kitchens has reached 98.5 percent.

In Chongqing, all school canteens are now connected to internet-enabled transparent kitchen systems, using artificial intelligence to identify 11 common food security risks and provide automatic voice alerts, according to the Chongqing Municipal Education Commission.

In Shanxi province, where 3,472 of 6,086 primary and secondary schools provide meal services to about 1.8 million students, the provincial government has allocated 220 million yuan in special funds for canteen construction and renovation and conducted 18 provincial-level food safety inspections.

"We have hired senior nutritionists to develop four sets of food menus for the entire county to ensure that students have different meals within a week or during the day," said Chen Guomin, director of the education and sports bureau of Linxian county in Lyuliang, Shanxi, as reported by China Education Daily.

Xu Nuo contributed to this story.

Rare pelicans flourish at Shanghai wetland reserve

By WANG XIN in Shanghai
wangxin2@chinadaily.com.cn

A record 26 rare Dalmatian pelicans were recently observed at the Jiuduansha Wetland Nature Reserve in Shanghai, highlighting the city's progress in biodiversity conservation and ecological protection.

The sighting follows two separate encounters in January, when a total of 17 Dalmatian pelicans were recorded at the reserve. The species had last been seen there in November 2021, when a single bird was spotted.

The Dalmatian pelican, a first-class nationally protected species, is the largest of all pelican species and one of the world's biggest waterfowl. It measures 1.6 to 1.8 meters in length and weighs more than 10 kilograms. Adults can have a wingspan of up to 3 meters and weigh as much as 15 kg.

"Dalmatian pelicans typically inhabit inland lakes, rivers, marshes and coastal areas with minimal human interference and high-quality ecological conditions," said Zhou Taoye, a staff member at the reserve's management affairs center. "They have strict environmental requirements and primarily feed on fish, crustaceans, mollusks and amphibians."

While pelicans are familiar to the public — they are often seen in zoos and are known for their distinctive large beaks — the East Asian population of Dalmatian pelicans is extremely rare. Breeding in western Mongolia and wintering along China's southeastern coast, their numbers were estimated at around 160 in early 2024.

Ma Zhijun, a professor of avian ecology at Fudan University's School of Life Sciences, said human hunting in their Mongolian breeding grounds and habitat loss due to human activity are the main causes of the species' decline.



Three Dalmatian pelicans at the Jiuduansha Wetland Nature Reserve on Feb 14. CHEN TENGJI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Jiuduansha Wetland Nature Reserve, located where the Yangtze River meets the East China Sea, is an uninhabited estuarine wetland with little human interference. Situated along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, it serves as a critical wintering site and stopover point for migratory waterfowl. In 2023, it was designated a nationally important wetland and included in the first batch of nationally significant habitats for terrestrial wildlife.

By June last year, the reserve was home to 63 species of higher plants, 126 species of macrofauna and 135 species of fish, according to Zhou. Additionally, 236 bird species have been recorded in the reserve and surrounding waters, including 10 species under first-class national protection and 41 under second-class protection.

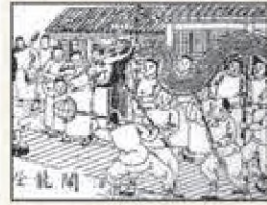
Shanghai has strengthened wetland and ecological conservation efforts in recent years. In July, the city's Chongming Dongtan Bird National Nature Reserve was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List as part of the Migratory Bird Sanctuaries along the Coast of the Yellow Sea-Bohai Gulf of China (Phase II). In December, 18 Dalmatian pelicans were observed there.

In October, Shanghai introduced a special wetland conservation plan focusing on six key areas: protection, restoration, management, research and monitoring, public engagement and sustainable use.

VISUAL



An icon of celebration



From the Qing Dynasty

It is said that Zeng Guofan, a general and the leader of the Xiang Army during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), would organize dragon leaping and jumping in his camp after winning a battle.



Beijing Olympics in 2008

Before the Olympic Games was held in Beijing in 2008, invited by China Central Television, dragon making master Qiu Guoliang led Peking University students in a dragon dance performance on the Great Wall for a promotional commercial, using two 100-meter-long dragons he made.



Guinness World Record in 2012

Gu Haoqiang, who learned his skills from Qiu, together with his father Gu Huixian, who is a bamboo weaving master, helped make a super-long dragon that measured 5.57 kilometers in 2012, setting a Guinness World Record for the longest dragon of its kind. It was gifted to an overseas Chinese trade union in Markham, Canada, to commemorate the centenary of the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, led by Sun Yat-sen.

BEHIND DRAGON AND LION MAKING TECHNIQUES

Editor's Note: Using a blend of words and visuals, this series explores unique communities and reveals the heart of China through food, architecture, craftsmanship, landscapes and traditions.

Dragons and lions provide link to the past

Traditional craft continues to be passed down to younger generation, **Cang Wei** reports in Nanjing

08

Dragon's soul

The glow of the eye is the soul of the dragon, and so the workshop that makes it sends the dragon assembled and only the eyes are sent separately so that the owner has the privilege of giving life to the dragon.



07

Assembly

The finished parts are assembled, such as the eyes, the horns covered in shiny fabric and the jaw so that it can move.



06

Texture

To create the final texture, the paper is covered with a shiny fabric of the color defined in the design. In this design, a fabric emulating shiny gold was used.



The dragon's body is made of fabric with bamboo hoops that give it a cylindrical shape. Several people hold it with bamboo sticks.

THE DRAGON

01

Bamboo

Bamboo is cut into thin strips of various thicknesses to construct the skeleton of the dragon.



Shuangfeng Xinhu dragon and lion making techniques are an intangible cultural heritage of Suzhou.

02

Folding

The bamboo must be bent to achieve the necessary shapes for the forehead, nose, head and eyes. This requires constant and gentle movements to avoid breaking it.



03

Joints

Bamboo mesh is created by joining the intersections with a soft, strong tape.



04

Paper

On the bamboo mesh, glue is applied to adhere very thin rice paper. Several layers are used in this process before decorating the head.



05

Pedestal

Once the head has been covered in paper, it is left to dry and the structure is mounted on a stand that allows it to be turned and manipulated easily.

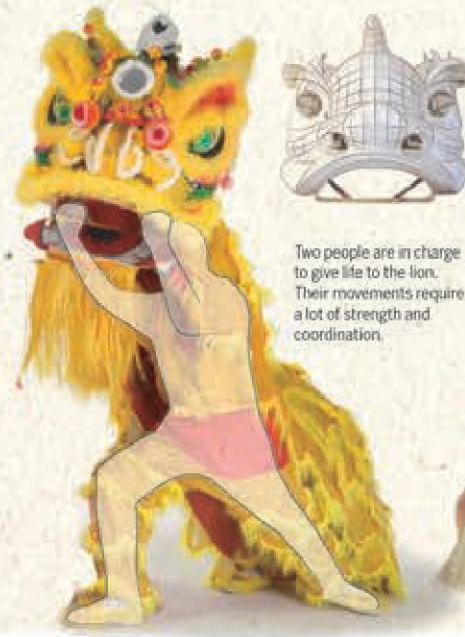


THE LION

The lion is a tender, strong and dynamic figure. The construction is very similar to the dragon although the structure of the head is larger and more complex. It can move its mouth, blink and move its ears.



Two people are in charge to give life to the lion. Their movements require a lot of strength and coordination.



The northern lion bears similarities with lions found in nature, with golden fur and sharp pearly teeth. During performances, they can be seen to canter, jump and bob to the beat of traditional Chinese cymbals and drums.

The southern lion has more of a mythical connotation, adorned with striking, bright colors. The performances tend to be more animated than that of the northern lion.

cutting, sewing, gluing, pasting, assembling and finishing.

He braved loneliness and hardships, honing his skills with determination. Occasionally, Gu Haoqiang and his colleagues had to work day and night to ensure a project was completed meticulously and on schedule.

In 2012, he was involved in a project to craft a 5.57-kilometer-long dragon, setting a Guinness World Record for the longest dragon of its kind.

Gu Haoqiang's skills have seen tremendous growth over two decades, thanks to the guidance of his father and teachers, and his relentless efforts.

Today, he is pioneering design innovations and mentoring apprentices to promote and improve the traditional craftsmanship.

Thanks to innovations over several generations, Shuangfeng's dragon and lion products have seamlessly merged traditional techniques with cutting-edge materials and contemporary aesthetics.

This updated process not only makes these items lighter and shortens production time but also enhances portability, all while preserving the vibrant artistry that defines them.

These creations have gained nationwide popularity and are even exported to countries such as the United States, France, Canada and many others.

WORLDUS

Consumers feel pinch of rising prices

Middle class finds inflation challenging, cuts down spending on food, groceries

By **BELINDA ROBINSON**
in New York
belindarobinson@chinadailyusa.com

A growing number of middle-class US people say they are finding it challenging to cope with inflation. The price increases have led them to cut spending in order to afford food, gas and groceries.

"My grocery bill went from \$150 for two weeks to \$250," Claire, 34, of New York, who declined to give her surname, told China Daily. "It's awful. It's absolutely enough."

"I think everybody who has the power to fix it is benefiting from it. So, they're making us think they're trying to fix it, but they're not," she said.

Inflation jumped to 3 percent in January and is picking up again. The Consumer Price Index rose 0.5 percent last month, the biggest gain since August 2023 on goods and services, up from 0.4 in December, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For many shoppers, groceries are now among their biggest expenses.

Food prices climbed 0.4 percent, and grocery store prices rose 0.5 percent, CPI data showed. Prices will likely remain high, as wholesale food prices are elevated.

"BIDEN INFLATION UP!" US President Donald Trump posted on Truth Social after the January inflation figures came out, blaming his predecessor, Joe Biden.

The reasons for inflation and high cost of goods are varied, say analysts. Some businesses may have "pre-emptively raised prices in anticipation of higher and broader tariffs on imported goods," Reuters reported.

Trump's current tariffs include 10 percent on all Chinese goods and across-the-board tariffs on steel and aluminum. While his proposed 25 percent tariffs on goods from Mexico and Canada were put on hold on Feb 3, they are scheduled to take effect in March, he confirmed.

Mexico sent 63 percent of its vege-

table exports to the United States, and 47 percent of its fruit and nut exports, according to US Department of Agriculture data.

"The high prices in stores and in general are almost burdensome," said Arnold Pri, 55, a financial adviser from Brooklyn, New York. "I think a lot of families are experiencing hardship due to the high price of eggs, and the high price of gas. They have to do something. It's just whether this administration can fix it."

"I'm coping. But you know, you're pulling back on discretionary spending. I graduated with a bachelor's in economics, so I understand the impact of tariffs, and that it is inflationary. I think that (the government) believes that the benefit of the revenue that they receive will offset it. And I'm not quite sure that's going to be the case."

US Vice-President JD Vance urged consumers to be patient, telling CBS News that "Rome wasn't built in a day," adding that "consumers are going to see lower prices at the pump and at the grocery store, but it's going to take a little bit of time."

A reduction in prices can't come soon enough for Duke Stewart, 45, from Brooklyn, New York, who said the cost of food is "crazy right now."

"Everything is going up, especially food," Stewart said. "I used to spend more money on clothes and things like that, but now I spend more on food. I want the prices to come down. Not sure what they can do."

The Conference Board's Consumer Confidence Index for February released on Tuesday fell to 98.3 — the largest monthly decline since August 2021. The University of Michigan's February survey showed consumer sentiment declined in February, down 10 percent from January.

The president's plan to tackle inflation involves cutting taxes, weeding out waste with the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, and increasing oil-drilling leases.



DOGE in the White House

Elon Musk, head of the Department of Government Efficiency, speaks during a Cabinet meeting chaired by US President Donald Trump at the White House on Wednesday.
ANDREW HARNIK / GETTY IMAGES

Expert: Discrepancies on impact of tariffs

By **HENG WEILI** in New York
hengweili@chinadailyusa.com

The Trump administration's tariffs on China have not reduced imports as has been claimed, and that is largely due to each country reporting different trade data and an under-reporting of direct-to-consumer trade, according to an adviser to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

In a blog post published on Feb 26 on the bank's Liberty Street Economics blog, Hunter L. Clark, an economic policy adviser to the FRBNY's Research and Statistics Group, concluded that US imports from China have decreased by much less than has been reported in official US statistics.

"As a result, the recent tariff increase on China could have a larger impact on the US economy than is suggested by official US data on the China import share, especially if favorable tariff treatment (the de minimis rule) for direct-to-consumer imports is ended," Clark wrote.

The blog was published a day before US President Donald Trump proposed another 10 percent tariff on Chinese imports — on top of the one that went into effect on Feb 4.

The Trump administration plans to end preferential treatments for so-called de minimis imports, which had incurred zero tariffs as long as they were valued under \$800.

The change was paused on Feb 7 after it had disrupted deliveries.

The US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and the US Postal Service did not have systems in place to process duties on approximately 4 million packages per day, which were backing up at ports of entry.

Online retailers Temu and Shein, which source their goods from China,

“The recent tariff increase on China could have a larger impact on the US economy than is suggested by official US data.”

Hunter L. Clark, economic policy adviser to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York

have been a major beneficiary of de minimis and are immensely popular in the US for their low prices, which compete with US e-commerce companies such as Amazon.

The White House has stated that the de minimis ban would be reinstated as soon as adequate systems are in place to "fully and expeditiously process and collect tariff revenue."

According to US data, imports from China fell from 21.6 percent of total US imports in 2018 to 13.4 percent in 2024, and the nominal value fell from \$505 billion to \$439 billion.

But according to data from the China General Administration of Customs, China's exports as a share of the US import market fell by only 2.5 percentage points, less than one-third of the drop in the US data. China's data says that its exports increased by \$91.2 billion, to \$524 billion.

Clark noted that while the US trade deficit with China from 2018 to 2024 declined from \$375 billion to \$295 billion, China's reported trade surplus with the US increased from \$278 billion to \$360 billion.

"The US's trade deficits with other

countries have increased continuously since 2018, which in part has reflected a shifting of manufacturing production chains out of China into third countries," Clark wrote. "The balance with China has either increased or decreased, depending on which country's data one chooses to believe."

"Simply stated, the US is saying it buys from China a lot less than what China says it is selling," Clark wrote. "Perhaps an even more important factor now is the de minimis exemption that has allowed imports from China to enter the US duty free and with light documentation."

Clark noted how the level for the exemption was raised from \$200 to \$800 in 2016, and "since then a combination of high import tariffs and innovations in direct-to-consumer business models have contributed to explosive growth."

"This trade is at least partially measured in China's export statistics but is absent in US import statistics," he wrote. "Such trade is not well measured but is very substantial and growing rapidly."

CBP has estimated that total de minimis exports from China (including via Hong Kong) accounted for about 67 percent of the US' total de minimis imports during fiscal years 2018 through 2021, Clark wrote.

The total was about \$200 billion, implying an average of about \$34 billion per fiscal year from China, Clark noted. But during that same period, China's officially reported de minimis exports to the US and Hong Kong were \$21 billion, less than one-fifth of the CBP's estimate.

"The data ... illustrates how large increases in tariffs against China have contributed to distortions in trade statistics caused, in part, by

private sector efforts to avoid payments on customs duties," Clark wrote. "In fact, the rapid expansion of low-value direct-to-consumer sales from China has allowed a very substantial amount of trade to completely bypass all of the tariffs that have been imposed on China beginning in 2018."

Clark said that there appears to be more than \$100 billion in "missing imports" in US data and possibly at least \$50 billion may be accounted for by de minimis trade.

"This suggests that US consumers could face larger consequences than meet the eye from the recent 10 percentage point tariff increase if the de minimis exemption is ended for China and Chinese sellers do not slash their profit margins by reducing their export prices," he wrote.

Ram Ben Tzion, CEO and co-founder of digital vetting platform Publican, told Air Cargo News that consumers faced paying more and waiting longer for items to be delivered.

"For Temu to remain viable in the US market, it will need to consider shifting some manufacturing to the US or alternative countries and make their operations more transparent," he said. "The broader e-commerce ecosystem will undergo dramatic shifts. This will require companies to rethink their business strategies and invest in new systems to comply with regulatory changes."

Judah Levine, head of research for rate portal Freightos, told Air Cargo News that Temu and Shein "had already begun preparations for a shift away from reliance on de minimis and air cargo, with more than a third of Temu's US orders reportedly already fulfilled from sellers with US-based inventory."

Trump floats another 10% tariff on China

By **BELINDA ROBINSON**
in New York
belindarobinson@chinadailyusa.com

US President Donald Trump has threatened to place an additional 10 percent tariff on Chinese imports on top of the 10 percent imposed earlier in February and said a 25 percent levy on Mexican and Canadian goods will take effect March 4.

"This would be an additional 10 percent [tariff] on China. ... This would be 10 plus 10," Trump told reporters Thursday during a meeting with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer at the White House.

Trump made the announcement after accusing Canada and Mexico of not stemming illicit fentanyl entering the United States.

"Drugs are still pouring into our country from Mexico and Canada at very high and unacceptable levels," Trump posted on Truth Social earlier Thursday.

"We cannot allow this scourge to continue to harm the USA, and therefore, until it stops, or is seriously limited, the proposed TARIFFS scheduled to go into effect on MARCH FOURTH will, indeed, go into effect, as scheduled."

US economists and trade groups said that any extra tariffs will likely hit American consumers the hardest.

Tiffany Smith, vice-president of global trade policy for the National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC) in

Washington DC, told China Daily, "Adding new and expanded tariffs will harm working families."

In his first term, Trump in 2018 placed tariffs on \$300 billion of Chinese-made goods sparking a trade war.

Former president Joe Biden maintained those original tariffs and increased levies on \$18 billion of Chinese imports in September.

"We made tremendous amounts of progress because of those tariffs. China paid us hundreds of billions of dollars. Billions!" Trump said of his previous levies.

In early February, a 25 percent tariff that was set to go into effect on goods from Mexico and Canada was put on hold for a month after both countries vowed to send more troops to the border, and Canada appointed a fentanyl czar.

President Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico sent 10,000 troops to the border and Sinaloa state, an alleged source of fentanyl trafficking.

The Canada Border Services Agency launched Operation Blizzard aimed at "intercepting illegal contraband arriving and leaving Canada, with a focus on fentanyl and other synthetic narcotics."

Mexico, Canada and China are the top three trading partners of the US, accounting for a third of goods imported and exported.

The three countries purchased more than \$1 trillion of goods from

the US and sent \$1.5 trillion worth of exports in 2023, US government data shows.

"Putting tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico risks undermining America's relationship with our closest trading partners and allies and has the potential to affect the price and availability of everything from avocados to automobiles," NFTC President Jake Colvin said in a Feb 1 statement.

Out of nearly \$4 trillion in goods and services imported in 2023, \$448 billion was from China, according to US Census Bureau data.

Mexico is also a major source of food imports, sending \$9.9 billion worth of vegetables and \$11 billion worth of fruit and juices to the US in 2023, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

Mary Lovely, professor emerita of economics at Syracuse University and senior fellow of the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, told China Daily that tariffs will "take a larger share of income" from low-earning households.

Trump told a reporter who contended that China does not pay the tariffs but American importers and consumers do that, "I think they're paid for by the country."

Trump is trying to get Americans to shop at home and for manufacturers to produce more domestically.

Lovely said that politicians often

tout tariffs as positive as they "cling to the belief that it creates jobs in the US."

In response, China's Ministry of Finance announced tariffs in February on US coal and liquefied natural gas, agricultural machinery such as farm equipment, large-displacement cars and pickup trucks.

Mexico has sent a trade delegation to the US to negotiate an agreement that will prevent tariffs. "We are working together to reach agreements before the fatal dates," Mexico's Deputy Foreign Trade Minister Luis Rosendo Gutierrez told Reuters.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that Canada "will have an immediate and extremely strong response" if US tariffs go ahead.

At least \$2.5 billion worth of goods are traded with Canada per day, or \$800 billion a year.

The US president confirmed another plan for further reciprocal tariffs globally starting in April due to "unfair" treatment of US companies like Apple. It would come after an investigation by his agencies.

Hundreds of billions of dollars of goods go between the European Union and the US. "We're going to have reciprocal tariffs," Trump said about the EU. "Whatever they charge us, we're going to charge them."

NOTICE

No 10, Wujiazhai, Huxiang village, Sanlin town, Pudong New Area, Shanghai [House and Real Estate Property Rights Certificate: Hu Fang Di Pu Zi (1999) No 002118], with Luo Caidi as the user of farmers' residence land.

According to document Hu Fu Tu No [2019] 754, "Announcement on Compensation Schemes for Expropriated Properties" with the number Hu (Pu) Zheng Di Fang Bu Gao [2023] No 609, the above mentioned property has been included in the land expropriation scope of the land reserve project of Sanlin Hengda Parcel 3, Pudong New Area.

At present, the project has entered the execution phase for the compensation of the houses on the expropriated land. Related rights holders of the above property cannot be contacted, so related property expropriation documents cannot be sent and negotiation cannot be conducted. Please contact the expropriation implementing unit within seven days from the date of the publication of this notice and provide a valid property ownership (property rights) certificate, identity certificate, contact address and contact number to ensure the delivery of relevant property expropriation documents to negotiate compensation for the expropriation. If you fail to contact us within the time limit, we will announce relevant details concerning the expropriation and compensation of your property in accordance with the regulations through the bulletin board of this base.

Office hours: 9:00 to 17:00, Monday to Friday
Address: Building 2, Zu Chongzhi Road 1500, Pudong New Area, Shanghai, China
Contact: Xu Jianzhong; Tel: 86-135 8594 8092
Supervision Hotline: 86-139 1683 8578
Property expropriation implementing unit: Shanghai Pudong No 1 Property Expropriation Service Firm Co Ltd

Appendix I:

Delivery Notice (1)

Luo Caidi (household),

According to document Hu Fu Tu No [2019] 754, "Announcement on Compensation Schemes for Expropriated Properties" with the number Hu (Pu) Zheng Di Fang Bu Gao [2023] No 609, the above mentioned property has been included in the land expropriation scope of the land reserve project of Sanlin Hengda Parcel 3, Pudong New Area. It is hereby notified that related documents will later be directly delivered to co-owners to whom documents are able to be sent. Co-owners who receive the documents should forward the documents to other co-owners and negotiate relevant affairs on a household basis.

Shanghai Pudong No 1 Property Expropriation Service Firm Co Ltd
Feb 28, 2025

GLOBAL LENS



From left: Visitors take photos at a panda cartoon installation at the Ocean Park in Hong Kong on Feb 23. CHU MENG MENG / XINHUA Visitors shop at a panda-themed store at the Ocean Park on Feb 16. CHAN LONG HEI / AP Visitors enter the panda enclosure to meet the Hong Kong-born panda twin cubs as they make their debut appearance before the public at the Ocean Park in Hong Kong on Feb 16. CHAN LONG HEI / AP

PANDA PLAYGROUND



Above: One of the Hong Kong-born giant panda twin cubs. **Below:** Visitors wait at the panda enclosure on Feb 16. PHOTOS BY CHAN LONG HEI / AP



Above: One of the Hong Kong-born giant panda twin cubs. PETER PARKS / AFP **Below:** Souvenirs related to the panda twin cubs. CHAN LONG HEI / AP



Giant panda twin cubs make their debut appearance before the media at Hong Kong's Ocean Park on Feb 15. CHAN LONG HEI / AP

Friendship between the joyful animals and Hong Kong continues to grow stronger

From pop-up exhibitions, drone shows to snacks, Hong Kong is catching the panda fever fast. Hong Kong's Ocean Park, home to six giant pandas on the south side of Hong Kong Island, has become a "panda paradise". The six include the giant pandas Ying Ying and Le Le — gifted by the central government to Hong Kong, and their twins born last August. Then there are the giant pandas An An and Ke Ke, also gifted by the central government to Hong Kong, who settled in the city in September.

These giant pandas, thriving in the love of the people, symbolize the deep friendship between the mainland and Hong Kong, and have also become a major attraction for countless tourists.

Climbing a small tree, "elder sister" skillfully reached a high spot and then leisurely lay down. Meanwhile, "little brother" was fully absorbed in playing on the swing hanging from a tree. After a brief moment of silence, the two little cubs began to chase each other and play joyfully.

At the Giant Panda Adventure of Ocean Park, the first pair of Hong Kong-born panda twins are full of energy and their adorable antics often bring smiles and laughter to visitors.

On their first day of public appearance, the duo broke records by attracting around 5,000 visitors, with thousands more tuning in to watch the livestream online.

"We have been waiting for this for 14 years," said Elke Wu, assistant curator of zoological operations at Ocean Park.

Wu recalled that when she first joined Ocean Park in 2007, Ying Ying and Le Le were over 1 year old and had just arrived in Hong Kong — only slightly older than the current twins. Over the years, the care team has watched them grow.

"In mid-August last year, during an ultrasound, we saw the fetus in her belly, and I was thrilled," Wu said. Ying Ying successfully gave birth to the twins on Aug 15,



Tourists pose with pandas at the Ocean Park on Dec 8 after An An and Ke Ke, the third pair of pandas, were donated to Hong Kong. CHEN DUO / XINHUA

becoming the oldest first-time mother giant panda on record.

As the group of giant pandas sparked a "national treasure fever" in Hong Kong, the "parents" Ying Ying and Le Le have also become popular on the internet.

Since the arrival of the first pair of giant pandas An An and Jia Jia, gifted to Hong Kong by the central government in 1999, giant pandas have become a thing to cherish for many Hong Kong residents. Although they have passed away and were buried in the park, An An and Jia Jia still have "fans" who occasionally visit to pay their respects.

National treasure

Recently in Hong Kong, a series of giant panda-themed activities are creating more than just sweet memories.

Nine-year-old Chan Long Yu, a student at Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, painted the scenery of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor in vibrant colors on a panda-shaped mold, earning her the second place in a citywide competition.

Her 12-year-old sister, Chan Chiu Yu, designed a community landmark for photo opportunities, painting a giant panda holding Hong Kong-style food on a waterfront promenade.

"Giant pandas are so cute. They are national treasures and one of Hong Kong's unique features," Chan Chiu Yu said.

Centered around the panda-themed IP, Hong Kong is actively developing its cultural and tourism industries. Ocean Park has launched over 400 related products, tourism companies have organized themed carnivals, and Hongkong Post issued special stamps.

In Hong Kong, the special relationship between giant pandas and humans, which has spanned decades, continues to deepen.

XINHUA

BUSINESS

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Cut in new solar panel capacity forecast for 2025

By ZHENG XIN
zhengxin@chinadaily.com.cn

China's solar power installations are expected to decline in 2025, as the industry cuts excessive production and shifts toward a more rational deployment of photovoltaic projects, according to industry forecasts.

China's newly installed photovoltaic capacity is expected to reach 215-255 gigawatts this year, according to data released by the China Photovoltaic Industry Association. This will be a year-on-year decline of between 8.13 percent and 22.54 percent, compared to the nation's newly installed photovoltaic capacity of around 277 GW last year.

Wang Bohua, honorary chairman of the association, said factors such as the implementation of distributed photovoltaic power generation management measures and market-based pricing reforms for new energy grid connections will lead to industry uncertainty.

This uncertainty is expected to affect the 2025 installation forecast, he said.

Rystad Energy echoed this view.

The global consultancy expects diminishing returns for renewable projects this year compared to stable revenues under the previous fixed-pricing framework.

The National Development and Reform Commission and the National Energy Administration issued a notice earlier this month to promote the integration of new energy sources like wind and solar power into the electricity market, to better reflect the market value of renewable power through supply and demand dynamics and ensure electricity prices are determined through competitive market mechanisms.

"Under the new pricing rules, electricity from renewables will drive the average price to decline due to its low variable cost, as the price would further go down especially during daytime when solar power continues generating power," said Deng Simeng, a senior analyst for renewables and power research at Rystad Energy.

"The fluctuations in price would be more significant because of the intermittent nature of renewable power."

"The downward trend in prices brings uncertainty to investors when considering new project development, and developers need to adapt to market-based rules through signing power pur-

chase agreements, utilizing battery storage and optimizing power output to compete with other energy sources," she added.

Li Ting, head of the electronic information department of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, said the government has been stepping up efforts to resolve structural contradictions in key industries, guiding local governments to adopt region-specific strategies for the rational deployment of photovoltaic projects, and aiming to reduce the expansion of photovoltaic manufacturing projects that focus solely on increasing capacity.

This includes raising the capital ratio before project construction and setting higher technical standards for products after construction to increase the industry's entry barriers.

Li added that the government will further enhance the role of regulatory policies, strengthen coordination with other departments and promote the high-quality development of the photovoltaic industry.

The government has been stepping up efforts to rein in overcapacity in the solar industry, to continue upgrades and structural adjustments in the sector.

MIIT issued an investment guideline for solar manufacturing projects in July, directing companies to ensure a minimum capital ratio of 30 percent for solar PV projects, and encouraging local governments to rationally allocate manufacturing projects based on local resource endowments and industrial foundations.

Global photovoltaic installations, according to the association, will continue to grow in 2025. In an optimistic scenario, global photovoltaic installations are expected to increase by 10 percent year-on-year, with rapid demand growth expected from emerging markets, such as the Middle East, said Wang.

In 2024, exports of photovoltaic products, including solar cells and modules, saw significant growth. The number of markets where exports exceeded 1 GW increased from 29 in 2023 to 38, with Asian markets, especially Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, emerging as key highlights, it said.

Companies looking to expand overseas should adopt strategic approaches, such as linking upstream and downstream operations and diversifying overseas production strategies, said Wang.



Two Nanjing Customs officers inspect export-bound vehicles at a container yard of Taicang Port, Jiangsu province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Firms boosting ties to weather tariff barriers

BRICS, BRI-related economies seen as bright spot for two-way commerce

By ZHONG NAN
zhongnan@chinadaily.com.cn

With rising protectionism creating strong headwinds for the global economy, Chinese companies have been proactively strengthening economic and trade ties by engaging with global business communities, ensuring the smooth operation of international supply chains and seeking fresh growth points.

Since last week, several delegations led by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade have departed China to visit countries including Germany, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, South Africa and Ethiopia. Their mission is to strengthen cooperation, actively advocate for multilateralism and contribute to global governance, said the Beijing-based CCPIIT.

Johannes Jung, director of strategy, commercial law, foreign trade and Europe at the Ministry of Economic Affairs of Baden-Wuerttemberg, a German state, said that with the rise of protectionism, fears have been growing among many multinational corporations about such tendencies.

These companies need "open markets, fair trade relations and reliable international perceptions" and the confidence that their investments abroad are safe, Jung said, adding that they need to make sure

they will find equal, fair and competitive conditions abroad.

Speaking at a business forum in Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia, this week, Chen Jianan, CCPIIT's vice-chairman, said that as the global supply chain is experiencing a profound transformation, strengthening international cooperation based on openness, inclusivity and mutual benefit remains the most effective way to navigate challenges and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

Chen said China will expand promotional efforts to facilitate the entry of high-quality Ethiopian products into its market. At the same time, it will encourage Chinese companies to export high-value-added products, including new energy technologies and manufacturing equipment, to support Ethiopia's economic transformation and industrial growth.

Wang Xiaosong, a professor at the School of Economics at Renmin University of China, said that participating in international trade shows and engaging with global business communities and government commerce officials can help Chinese companies to ensure stable overseas market access and mitigate risks.

As Chinese companies expand globally through innovation and strategic international deployment, Jiangsu Solicitude Medical Techno-

gy (Group) Co Ltd, a Suzhou, Jiangsu province-based medical equipment and materials manufacturer, has already entered multiple emerging markets by transitioning from product exports to full-scale industrial chain integration in overseas markets.

"In addition to exporting equipment, we provide dialyzer assembly equipment and raw material membranes to our foreign clients, facilitating localized production of dialyzers. This flexible market approach has granted us a strong competitive edge in emerging markets such as South Africa, Brazil and India," said Ling Juping, the company's manager for Customs affairs.

The company's exports to other BRICS countries totaled 4.47 million yuan (\$614,437) in January, accounting for 23 percent of its total exports to other BRICS markets for 2024, said Nanjing Customs.

Initially an acronym for five major emerging markets with considerable economic potential, BRICS began with Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and has now evolved into an influential international cooperation mechanism with an expanded membership.

Wuxi BioHermes Bio & Medical Technology Co Ltd, a company specializing in the production of diabetes in vitro diagnostic products in Wuxi, Jiangsu, has allocated more resources to expand its presence in the African market, where there is a substantial unmet demand for diabetes treatments.

Optimism over new US trade outcome

By WANG KEJU
wangkeju@chinadaily.com.cn

China has maintained open lines of communication with the United States Department of Commerce, the Ministry of Commerce said on Thursday, in response to US President Donald Trump's remarks that Washington might reach a new trade agreement with Beijing.

In the face of ongoing trade tensions with the US, He Yadong, a spokesman for the ministry, said that China has reiterated its resolute opposition to the unilateral tariff measures imposed by the US, while affirming its commitment to safeguarding its legitimate rights and interests.

At the same time, China expressed its willingness to resolve outstanding issues through dialogue and negotiation. He added at a news conference.

The White House has imposed additional tariffs of 10 percent on all Chinese imports and issued restrictions on the two countries' two-way investment, among others. China has been compelled to resort to certain countermeasures.

The latest round of tariff hikes imposed by the US has expanded in scope and intensity, a clear indication that tariffs are increasingly being leveraged as a tool to bolster its fiscal revenue, said Cui Fan, a professor of international trade at the University of International Business and Economics.

In particular, the US is clearly betting that the use of tariffs can help it extract concessions from its trading partners, including China, in pursuit of its broader economic and geopolitical objectives, Cui said.

Even if the two sides eventually make progress toward a comprehensive agreement, the threat of additional tariffs is likely to persist as a bargaining chip for the US, Cui added.

"China's position on trade issues with the US has been consistent and clear. We are open to constructive dialogue and negotiation, but we will not back down when it comes to safeguarding our fundamental interests," said Zhou Mi, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation.

The US is essentially shooting itself in the foot by pursuing these protectionist measures. The ultimate losers are the US consumers and businesses, who are bearing the brunt of the "blowback" from the trade war, Zhou said.

These tariffs are essentially a tax on US residents, driving up the costs of everything from household appliances to automobiles. This, in turn, is fueling inflationary pressures that are eroding the purchasing power of US consumers, Zhou said.

Moreover, the trade war has undermined the global competitiveness of US products, as retaliatory tariffs from trading partners like China make US goods more expensive and less attractive in overseas markets, Zhou added.

"The path forward requires the US to engage in good-faith negotiations, address the legitimate concerns of its trading partners, and work toward mutually beneficial solutions," Zhou said. "Clinging to a misguided 'America First' agenda will only serve to undermine the US' long-term economic interests."

Consumer goods to gain solid footing

By FAN FEIFEI
fanfeifei@chinadaily.com.cn

China's home appliances and consumer electronics sector is expected to show strong growth momentum this year, fueled by the country's latest measures to expand the scope of its consumer goods trade-in program amid a broader drive to boost domestic demand and spur economic growth, experts said.

They said that the expansion of the trade-in program, including new subsidies for electronic product trade-ins, as well as the increased number of categories for home appliances, will further stimulate consumer appetite for spending and bolster a recovery in consumption.

China's large-scale equipment upgrade and consumer goods trade-in program, which kicked off last March, yielded fruitful results in 2024, driving strong growth in consumption.

Data from the National Development and Reform Commission showed that more than 37 million consumers purchased over 62 million home appliances last year, with total sales reaching 270 billion yuan (\$37.2 billion). Products with the

highest level of energy efficiency accounted for over 90 percent of the total sales revenue.

China announced in January a raft of measures to expand the scope of consumer goods in the trade-in program. Under the expanded program, the categories of home appliances eligible for government subsidies have been increased from eight in 2024 to 12 this year. Microwaves, water purifiers, dishwashers and rice cookers have been added to the trade-in list for home appliances.

Consumers can also enjoy subsidies of up to 500 yuan apiece when purchasing digital products like mobile phones, tablets, smartwatches and wristbands.

Guo Meide, president of Beijing-based market consultancy All View Cloud, said the expanded consumer goods trade-in program will not only unleash consumption potential for home appliances and consumer electronic devices, but also drive technological advancement and product upgrades, as well as promote the green and intelligent transformation of traditional industries.

The "old-for-new" program, he added, is conducive to weeding out consumer goods with high energy

consumption and declining performance, promoting the popularization of green and energy-saving home appliances, and improving people's quality of life.

According to a report released by AVC, environmentally friendly and energy-saving home appliance products, such as air conditioners and gas stoves, are increasingly favored by Chinese consumers, while the sales of intelligent household appliances that integrate artificial intelligence-powered large language models have witnessed robust growth.

AVC estimated that sales of home appliances in China reached 907.1 billion yuan last year, up 6.4 percent year-on-year, hitting a record high, while the figure is projected to rise to 915.5 billion yuan this year.

Pan Xuefei, research director at market consultancy IDC China, said the expansion of the consumer goods trade-in program this year, especially offering subsidies for the purchase of digital products, will motivate more consumers to replace their old smartphones with new ones, which will undoubtedly further spur consumption.

Min Qi, general manager of Chinese retailer Suning's store platform



Shoppers browse mobile phones offering trade-in subsidies at a store in Tongling, Anhui province. CHU ZHUCHUAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

business division, said the company will continue to cooperate with major brands to launch new digital products in the first quarter of this year, and driven by the trade-in program, sales of household appliances and consumer electronic products are expected to see explosive growth with revenue doubling or tripling year-on-year during the January-March period.

Chinese smartphone maker Oppo said the government subsidy program will effectively stimulate consumer enthusiasm for buying smartphones and improve their purchasing power.

The company added that it will

provide shoppers with high-quality products through technological innovation.

Meanwhile, Chinese home appliance enterprises are accelerating steps to expand recycling channels and drive the popularization of green and intelligent products.

Hisense Group is intensifying efforts to establish online and offline recycling and disposal channels for discarded home appliances.

Gree Electric Appliances, a major Chinese home appliance manufacturer based in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, has announced plans to invest 3 billion yuan to promote trade-ins of consumer goods.

CHINA DAILY USA

NEW YORK HEADQUARTERS

1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036

Telephone: 212-537-8888

Fax: 212-537-8898

editor@chinadailyusa.com

readers@chinadailyusa.com

Subscription: 212-537-8899

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WASHINGTON

National Press Bldg, Suite 1108 529 14th Street NW
Washington, DC 20045
Tel: 202-662-7249

Fax: 202-662-7247

SAN FRANCISCO

235 Montgomery Street, Suite 900,
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415-348-6288
Fax: 415-348-6388

SEATTLE

800 Fifth Ave, Suite 4100
Seattle, WA 98104

Tel: 206-922-2868

HOUSTON

1001 South Dairy Ashford Suite 100
Houston, TX 77077
Tel: 713-595-7660

CANADA | TORONTO

471 Yonge Street, 10th Floor
Toronto, Ontario, M2N 6K8
Tel: 416-481-5706

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BUSINESSFOCUS

CHINA UP-CLOSE

Membership stores bright spot in retail biz

Maidelong has nationwide supply chain network serving 200,000 corporate members in 64 cities

By WANG ZHUOQIONG
wangzhuoqiong@chinadaily.com.cn

Membership stores have continued gaining traction in the Chinese retail market as middle-income consumers increasingly prioritize product quality and healthy lifestyles.

Maidelong, formerly known as Metro China, is accelerating its retail expansion this year, increasing its presence in lower-tier cities while enhancing supply chains and private-label product offerings, said Xu Shaochuan, executive director, chairman and president of the company's supply chain.

In an interview with China Daily, Xu said the retailer is establishing its first distribution center and opening its first store in China's island province Hainan, along with its first store in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province.

"We have quickened our pace in market penetration while strengthening our supply chain to support this expansion," Xu said.

Maidelong has built a nationwide supply chain network that serves 200,000 corporate members in 64 cities. It currently operates 100 stores across 60 cities, catering to over 20 million households.

As competition intensifies in China's membership-based retail market, differentiation through product assortment is becoming a key strategy.

Xu said Maidelong aims to increase the share of its private-label line — M-Select and M-Basic — to 50 percent of its merchandise mix — up from the current 40 percent. M-select is a private brand of globally-sourced products for consumers; M-basic is a private brand supplying products to B2B enterprise clients.

"The retail industry still faces a serious challenge of product homogenization," he said.

In a bid to enhance its imported food offerings, Maidelong is currently co-hosting the Italian Food Festival with the Italian Trade Agency. The festival features nine major categories of Italian cuisine, covering over 60 subcategories, including iconic products such as cheeses, hams, olive oil, wines and coffee.

"We have specifically selected products with geographical indications and regional certifications to bring authentic Italian flavors to China," Xu said. "This festival is an extension of our European food import and procurement strategy."

Looking ahead, Maidelong plans to expand this initiative to other countries, holding rotating food festivals to introduce more international flavors to Chinese consumers, said the executive.

"Imported goods are a key part of Maidelong's business," Xu said. "One of our top priorities this year is to expand our imported food portfolio to boost domestic demand and enhance our competitive edge."



Above: Customers shop at a Maidelong store in Huai'an, Jiangsu province, in January.

ZHAO QIRUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Right: A view of customers at a Sam's Club store in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, in February.

PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“One of our top priorities this year is to expand our imported food portfolio to boost domestic demand and enhance our competitive edge.”

Xu Shaochuan, executive director, chairman and president of Maidelong's supply chain

20 percent year-on-year annual sales increase of membership stores in China



In November, the company will introduce over 30 new products at the China International Import Expo this year.

"Enhancing both product offerings and market penetration is a priority for all membership store operators," said Jason Yu, general manager of CTR Market Research.

"But for Maidelong, developing private-label brands tailored to young, middle-income Chinese families seems even more crucial."

For membership stores, growth is no longer just about expanding

market coverage. Industry experts emphasize the importance of leveraging core strengths while continuously innovating and optimizing offerings, according to Kantar Worldpanel China, a unit of CTR.

This includes introducing exclusive products, enhancing experiential services and integrating supply chain capabilities to create competitive advantages.

By doing so, retailers can more effectively attract and retain target consumers across different city tiers, fostering long-term sustaina-

ble growth, according to Kantar.

Maidelong is also ramping up its digital transformation. Xu said the company aims to increase online sales, which currently account for 30 percent of revenue, as its e-commerce grows at a faster pace than offline retail.

As part of this effort, Maidelong has launched its first warehouse nearby model in Changchun, Jilin province, as a trial, to speed up delivery efficiency.

The company operates two digital platforms: Maifuli, a B2B platform,

and a B2C platform — Maidelong — developed through Dmall, a sibling unit under its parent company, Wumart Group.

Xu added that Maidelong is integrating AI-driven tools, including DeepSeek big models, to enhance digital operations, improve efficiency and drive business performance.

In 2024, membership stores in China experienced strong growth momentum, with annual sales increasing by more than 20 percent year-on-year, according to Kantar Worldpanel.

International retailers, led by Sam's Club, have expanded rapidly in the Chinese market, leveraging their mature supply chains, high-value private-label products and strong member loyalty to establish a dominant position.

Data from Kantar Worldpanel show that in 2024, Sam's Club's penetration rate surpassed 7 percent, marking a 2 percentage point increase from the previous year. The retailer plans to continue expanding into smaller city markets this year.

Walmart Inc, parent company of Sam's Club, reported strong fourth-quarter results this month, with robust revenue and operating income growth. For the full fiscal year, Walmart's revenue reached \$681 billion, up 5.1 percent year-on-year.

Walmart China net sales reached \$5.1 billion in the fourth quarter, up 27.7 percent year-on-year. In China, Walmart's e-commerce sales surged 34 percent year-on-year during the fourth quarter, of which Sam's Club operations in the country contributed a major portion.

"For the quarter and the year, we're pleased with our performance during the holiday season across the world," said Walmart CEO Douglas McMillon. "We performed well in the US, Mexico, Canada and China."

He said Sam's Club in China just wrapped up a strong Spring Festival operation.

John David Rainey, Walmart's executive vice-president and CFO, said China is a key growth market. "Our business in China continued to grow at a double-digit pace, driven by the strength of Sam's Club and e-commerce," he said.

As of 2024, Walmart operated 283 Walmart stores and 53 Sam's Club stores in China. In the fiscal year, the company opened six new stores, including four in the fourth quarter.

In addition, domestic membership store brands are also actively growing their presence.

M Club, a subsidiary of RT-Mart, operated nine stores across the country in 2024 and plans to focus on expanding in Jiangsu province in 2025 to deepen its market penetration.

Kantar Worldpanel data showed that M Club venues are the most dynamic segment within RT-Mart's business portfolio, with particularly strong sales growth in 2024.

By WANG ZHUOQIONG

China's urban fast-moving consumer goods market recorded a 1.2 percent year-on-year sales increase in the fourth quarter, bringing full-year growth to 1.7 percent, according to Kantar Worldpanel's latest report.

The overall market remained stable, with notable shifts across product categories, regional performance and retail formats, said the report.

The beverage sector emerged as the strongest performer, posting over 7 percent growth in 2024. Meanwhile, the personal care category remained in decline, though the contraction eased in the fourth quarter.

Dairy products continued to face significant growth pressure, reflecting shifting consumer demand and competitive market dynamics.

Regionally, all areas except South China posted positive growth. Smaller cities, particularly county and town-level markets, played a crucial role in driving FMCG expansion. As urbanization accelerates, these markets are expected to fuel further demand.

Modern retail channels, including hypermarkets, supermarkets and convenience stores, saw a slight 0.4 percent decline in the fourth

quarter, primarily due to the underperformance of large-format stores, said the report.

The rise of discount retailers and the growing strength of online channels, particularly instant retail services, contributed to the penetration losses of convenience stores, especially in southern China.

Hema Fresh, the supermarket chain of Alibaba Group, led growth among the top 10 retailers, expanding its market share by 0.4 percentage points year-on-year in the fourth quarter, driven by aggressive store expansion and business diversification. Walmart and Spar also saw gains. Walmart Group's fourth quarter market share rose to 5.1 percent versus 4.6 percent a year prior.

Large-format retailers have seen stable growth, despite facing mounting challenges in attracting more foot traffic. To counteract this trend, businesses are focusing on product optimization, health-conscious offerings and immersive in-store experiences. Upgraded store layouts and personalized shopping environments are becoming key strategies.

Several leading retailers, including Yonghui Supermarket and Better Life, have revamped store formats, emphasizing fresh produce, private-label development

Urban fast-moving consumer goods sales show uptrend



A customer checks out beverages at a supermarket in Binzhou, Shandong province, in February. CHU BAORUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

and value-added services.

Meanwhile, regional players in Henan province — such as Pangdonglai, Dennis and Dazhang Group — have leveraged deep local market insights and diversified retail networks to strengthen their positions.

Consumer demand for speed and convenience fueled a surge in instant retail, with the nearby warehouse model achieving over 26 percent annual sales growth. Retailers across various formats accelerated investment in fast delivery services.

Sam's Club and Hema expanded their warehouse networks, while Walmart partnered with Meituan for instant delivery. Pupu Supermarket reported 7 percent year-on-year growth, while Xiaoxiang Supermarket under Meituan expanded to 15 cities, leveraging promotions and private-label strategies.

E-commerce giants also capitalized on the instant retail trend. Taobao added an "Hourly Delivery" feature, Dada Group integrated into JD.com's ecosystem with "JD Speed Delivery," and JD's 7Fresh optimized its logistics to drive strong online sales growth.

Discount retailing remained a key industry trend in 2024. Kantar Worldpanel data showed that the

penetration rate of discount snack stores surpassed 30 percent, with strong growth in lower-tier markets.

Aldi expanded its presence in Shanghai, increasing its penetration rate by 9 percentage points and is now eyeing the broader Yangtze River Delta. More than a quarter of families in Shanghai surveyed purchased from Aldi, according to the report. Domestic retailers such as Hema and Yonghui are also investing in discount formats.

Despite stable overall market shares, e-commerce platforms are engaged in aggressive price competition. Taobao and Tmall retained the lead but lost 3 percentage points in market share, while Douyin surged ahead of Pinduoduo to become the second-largest e-commerce platform, capturing 49 percent of urban households in China.

Douyin's focus on local services and interactive shopping experiences has strengthened user engagement, while Xiaohongshu, a Chinese lifestyle platform, expanded into more urban markets.

As China's retail landscape continues to evolve, businesses must adapt to shifting consumer behaviors. The rise of community stores, instant retail and discount channels will redefine market dynamics in the coming years, said the report.

Tourists flock to Shanxi for winter thrills

Top athletes among those championing province's wealth of snow and ice assets



Shanxi athlete Jiang Xinjie wins silver in the final of the men's snowboarding big air event at the 9th Asian Winter Games. MOU YU / XINHUA



The Guangwu International Ski Resort in Shuozhou city boasts 16 ski courses, with an elevation difference of up to 300 meters. JI BAOQUAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

By YUAN SHENGGAO

The 9th Asian Winter Games, which ran from Feb 7 to 15 in Harbin, the capital city of Northeast China's Heilongjiang province, were not only a venue to showcase the performance of athletes, but displayed the overall development of the winter sports sector in China.

Shanxi, a province in North China, used the event to showcase its high-quality development of the winter sports sector, in terms of athletic sports, grassroots sports, the snow and ice economy and winter sports-related industries.

On Feb 10, Shanxi athlete Jiang Xinjie won silver in the final of the men's snowboarding big air event at the Games. It marked his first individual medal at the Asian Winter Games and the first for Shanxi.

In the first round of the competition, Jiang executed a flawless 1,440-degree rotation, landing smoothly to earn 83.25 points and temporarily placing him in second. After three rounds, Jiang secured the silver medal with a total score of 160.25 points.

The young talent from Shanxi has been making a name for himself over the past two years. In February 2023, he claimed second place at the X Games China 2022 Skiing Tour Finals. In 2024, he won silver in the youth group's snowboarding slopestyle event at the 14th National Winter Games. In January 2025, Jiang was selected to represent China at the Asian Winter Games.

He was not the first Shanxi athlete to garner a medal at international winter sports events.

Shanxi athlete Su Yiming was champion in the men's snowboard big air final at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics on Feb 15 that year, securing Shanxi province's first Winter Olympic gold.

The rise of Shanxi's winter sports athletes is testimony to the province's growing popularity and rapid development of snow and ice sports.



Left: Skaters wave flags at the opening ceremony of an ice and snow carnival held in Datong's Wenying Lake Park. ZHAO WENGUI / FOR CHINA DAILY
Right: Tourists admire rime in the Tongtian Gorge Scenic Area in Pingshun county. ZHANG HAI / FOR CHINA DAILY



Over recent years, Shanxi's athletes have performed brilliantly in a number of national and international events.

During the 2024-25 National Alpine Skiing Championships, for instance, Shanxi athlete Liu Juntong won gold in the men's downhill event. And during the 2024-25 National Cross-Country Skiing Championships, the Shanxi team garnered one silver and two bronze medals.

After winning a gold medal at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, Su continued to win at a number of international events in the years to follow.

Younger athletes have continued to contribute to the development of Shanxi's winter sports. At the 2025 China Youth Ice Hockey Tournament held in Harbin from Feb 8 to 10, the Shanxi U10 team — consisting of athletes less than 10 years old — won.

Shanxi residents were not entirely surprised with the performance, as they think enthusiasm and tradition at the grassroots level are crucial to foster top athletes.

Indeed, residents in Shanxi have an enthusiasm and tradition in winter sports. Over the recent years,

there have been plenty of such events — at either amateur or professional levels — held in Shanxi.

On Dec 7, 2024, the Baidengshan ski tournament kicked off in the northern Shanxi city of Datong, attracting the participation of more than 400 professional athletes from across the country and an even greater number of amateurs.

A women surnamed Hu, from Shangqiu city in Henan province, brought her 10-year-old daughter to the event.

"My daughter and I are both ski enthusiasts," Hu said. "While enjoying the fun and excitement of skiing here in Datong, I hope my daughter can learn from the professional athletes at the tournament."

Ski resorts are now the major destinations for winter tourism. The Guangwu International Ski Resort in the city of Shuozhou is one such destination.

Among the skiers, there was a woman surnamed Wang from the neighboring city of Datong. She said she came to Guangwu to ski because of its comprehensive facilities.

The resort boasts 16 ski courses, with an elevation difference up to 300 meters. "This allows me to per-

fectly enjoy the excitement of skiing," Wang said.

The fun of winter sports is not limited to skiing and skating. In Shanxi, there are a wide range of options for participants to choose from.

In the northern Shanxi county of Youyu, for example, winter sports have developed in multiple forms in recent years. The enthusiasm for sports is so strong that many of the frozen water bodies in the county become skiing venues in winter.

A lake in the county's Nanhewan Wetland Park is among favorites with ice and snow sports enthusiasts. In winter, the site gathers hundreds of people every day, who attend amateur competitions, learn to ski from professional trainers, or ride sleighs, ice slides and ice motorcycles for fun.

For many visitors, the most exciting sport is riding an ice slide. Built on a natural slope at the Nanshan Forest Park in the county, the ice slide is said to be among the longest in North China.

Wang Xuefei, a local and a frequent visitor to the site, said he was thrilled with the speed achieved when riding the slide.

"It takes only 28 seconds to finish the 360-meter trip," he said. "That's

almost the speed of a car on the road."

He added that he also takes his child to the venue to learn skating and skiing from the trainers.

Meanwhile, more snow and ice-related activities were held in Datong. On Jan 22, an ice and snow carnival opened in the city's Wenying Lake Park. The event included a grassroots skating tournament and a fishing contest on the frozen lake. In addition, there were also concerts and camping activities.

In Shanxi as a whole, the province's ice and snow sports have developed into a larger-scale industry. It has a number of clubs and professional teams in such sports as skating, snowboarding, alpine skiing, cross-country skiing and curling.

In addition to residents' enthusiasm, support from local enterprises is contributing to the development of winter sports. In Shanxi, there are hundreds of entities engaged in winter sports operations, with skiing and skating venues scattered throughout the province.

There are also dozens of enterprises offering infrastructure and service support to winter sports events nationwide. During the 9th Asian Winter Games, Geely New Energy

Commercial Vehicle — based in the Shanxi city of Jinzhong — was an official partner of the event. It offered 350 methanol-electric and hydrogen-electric hybrid cars to the Games to ensure safe and low-carbon transport for the event.

Other service providers from Shanxi to the event, including State Grid Xinzhou Electric Power Supply and Shanxi Mechanization Construction Group, have all served the Games with dedicated efforts.

Shanxi views ice and snow as a precious asset to attract tourists. The tourism administration of the province recently revealed a road map to Shanxi's 38 ice and snow sports venues for tourists to choose from.

Tourism authorities said that Shanxi adopts an "ice and snow plus" approach to its winter tourism development.

For instance, many winter sports venues in Shanxi are adjacent to popular tourism destinations, offering visitors the choices of taking part in sports, sightseeing, enjoying local food and relaxing.

Ice and snow resources are adding to the glamor of tourist destinations in mountainous areas. The Tongtian Gorge Scenic Area in Pingshun county, a part of the Taihang Mountains, for example, has been drawing in a growing number of tourists in recent winters.

People are attracted there because the rimes on the trees and rocks make the gorge a spectacular sight. Rime is a special type of frost — granular tufts of ice that appear only when warm water vapor meets colder air. In the Tongtian Gorge, running streams can produce warmer water vapor and rime can be generated if a cold front comes, according to local residents.

In the scenic area, delicate rimes cover trees with filigree of frost to create breathtaking natural scenery, turning the gorge into a dreamy landscape and attracting tourists to come and take pictures.

Zhang Qi contributed to this story.



From Left: The snow-covered Yongzuo Temple in Taiyuan city offers a special sight to visitors. ZHANG QI / FOR CHINA DAILY The Qicai Taihang Yunshang Ski Resort is a new winter tour destination in Lingchuan county. ZHAO XIAYU / FOR CHINA DAILY



ADVERTORIAL

COMMENT

Editorials

DPP will have to pay an increasingly higher price to continue its doomed paycheck policy

Although the cross-strait situation remains stable, thanks to the strategic restraint Beijing exercises, the secessionist-minded Democratic Progressive Party authorities on Taiwan island have never stopped trying to make waves by proving their value to their external backers.

With the return of the "America first" fixated Donald Trump administration, the Lai Ching-te authorities of the island are focused on using economic interests to woo the administration's support for their secessionist cause. In their latest move in that regard, the DPP unveiled a plan to build a "non-red supply chain" with the United States at the expense of the island's competitive industry and development prospects. Taiwan's semiconductor sector and dominant enterprises, the core competitiveness of the island, are to be employed as the means to meet their narrow ends.

The eagerness of the Lai authorities to cater to the Trump administration, whose coveting of the island's semiconductor industry is no secret, with their "paycheck policy" has met with wide opposition of the sector but garnered some "positive" responses from the US administration.

Shortly after Lai pledged to boost investment in the US under the excuse it was responding to the Trump administration's "global tariff threats", the US administration released \$5.3 billion in previously frozen foreign aid, including \$870 million in security exemptions for programs in the Chinese island, late last week. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio reaffirmed Washington's opposition to any change to the "status quo" in the Taiwan Strait, while saying that the US remains committed to its long-standing policies on Taiwan.

Yet the Lai authorities must be aware that the new administration stops short of mentioning such words as "values", "democracy" or "freedom" that dominated its predecessor's statements on Taiwan. Instead, the emphasis is on "investment", "tariffs" and "industries". That requires the DPP authorities to ceaselessly increase their input and adjust their expectations of the US side.

The shock waves caused by the US' about-face in its foreign and economic policies over the past month must have kept the Lai authorities in an extremely uneasy state. And the price Ukraine now faces for the US' support should give the DPP authorities cause for thought as they should realize that the price for the US' backing has risen steeply.

What the DPP authorities value the most is the US' reiterating of its "commitment" to "protect Taiwan" in case of "emergency". But what the US seems to be willing to promise so far is that it will prevent the "emergency" from happening rather than it will protect the island.

So Trump's refusal to answer a question from the media about whether "the US would allow China to take control of Taiwan by force" ahead of the first official Cabinet meeting of his second term on Wednesday must have dealt a heavy blow to the expectant Lai authorities.

Responding to that question, Trump said, "I never comment on that. I don't want to ever put myself in that position." And Taipei's unease will only have been further heightened by Trump's claim of his "great relations" with his Chinese counterpart, and the unquestioned openness of the US leader to strengthen economic and trade cooperation with the mainland.

That means, which should also be to the delight of the Trump administration, the Lai authorities will have to raise their stakes in the risky gambling. But the question is after offering even the jewel in the crown of the island's economy in the first month of the new US administration being in office, what else can they use to pay tribute to their imagined backers in Washington during the rest of their tenure.

As was stressed in the Taiwan work conference, held on Tuesday and Wednesday, Beijing aims to maintain the ability to steer relations across the Taiwan Strait. To this end, it will promote the deepening of the two sides' integrated development to allow Taiwan compatriots to share the development opportunities and outcomes of Chinese modernization.

The "stability" the US side stresses refers to a stable cross-strait environment in which it can reap investment and trade deals from both sides of the Strait at the same time. By handling the Taiwan question with caution and steering clear of antagonizing Beijing with provocative moves, which would only render the island valueless on the US' economic map and incur a huge cost for the US, the US can indeed position itself to benefit from having a good relationship with Beijing.

Instead of playing the "Taiwan card" and directly or indirectly colluding with the DPP in fabricating "Taiwan independence" fallacies that will only "push Taiwan into the throes of disaster", the US administration should make efforts to consolidate the international community's commitment to the one-China principle.

Reengagement with China, EU's best bet

During the first Donald Trump administration, relations between the United States and the European Union were marked by significant tensions and challenges. President Trump's "America first" approach and his skepticism toward multilateral institutions and agreements strained the traditional transatlantic partnership.

And the administration's imposing of tariffs on European goods, particularly steel and aluminum, citing national security concerns, sparked a trade war between the two allies.

At the start of his second stint in office, differences have already emerged in their respective approaches toward Russia and the Ukraine crisis, and in yet another sign that the cozy relations US and its European allies are being shaken, Trump said on Wednesday that his administration would soon announce a 25 percent tariff "on cars and all other things from the EU", which he claimed had been "formed in order to screw the US".

Citing the US trade deficit of about \$300 billion, he said the bloc had "really taken advantage" of the US, which he said accepts everything from the EU, while the EU doesn't accept US cars and farm products, using "all sorts of reasons why not". The European Commission responded by saying it will react "firmly and immediately against unjustified barriers to free and fair trade".

"The EU will always protect European businesses, workers, and consumers from unjustified tariffs," a spokesperson for the commission said, noting that as the world's largest free market, the EU has "facilitated trade, reduced costs for US... As a result, US investments in Europe are highly profitable".

The proposed move marks the intensifying frictions between the US and its European partners, which were thrust into the spotlight by the speech US Vice-President JD Vance made at the Munich Security Conference earlier this month, which sharply criticized European leaders and was viewed by much of his European audience as the administration meddling in the internal politics of some of the EU members.

But tariffs are a central part of Trump's economic vision, and he has told his supporters repeatedly that tariffs will do no harm to US consumers. "It's a cost to another country".

That assumption is wrong, because it is US consumers and companies that bear the costs of increased tariffs, through either the higher prices of imported goods or inflation, according to economists. In particular, the cost to lower-income families is magnified given essentials such as food and energy are most exposed to the import tariffs.

The Peterson Institute for International Economics expects that the tariff hikes on imports from Mexico, Canada and China alone will cost a typical US household about \$1,200 per year. Now with a trade war looming between the US and the EU, and inflation running at an annual rate of 3 percent, the suffering to be felt by the US' households in the near future is bound to increase.

There is no winner in any trade war, as China has repeatedly reminded the US side. To solve their trade disputes, relevant parties must conduct dialogue and consultation based on equality and mutual respect. The unilateral imposition of tariffs will only complicate the problems and lead to a lose-lose situation. It will also disrupt the global industry and supply chains, dent business confidence, and cause a global economic slowdown.

Trump's proposed tariff hikes should be a wake-up call to Europe, which should join hands with China to uphold their shared commitment to multilateralism and free trade. As the past has shown, strong and stable relations between China and the EU serve as a source of stability and certainty for the world economy. For its own benefit, and that of the world at large, the EU should reconsider its "de-risking" strategy toward China, and work with the country to get the stalled Comprehensive Agreement on Investment over the line.

CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

China Daily
15 Huxin Dongjie Chaoyang District,
Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366
editor@chinadaily.com.cn
Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631
ads@chinadaily.com.cn
Subscription: +86-400-999-0203
subscription.chinadaily.com.cn
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

China Daily UK
90 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chinadailyuk.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
China Daily Hong Kong
Unit 1818, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan
Praya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2518 5111
editor@chinadailyhk.com
editor@chinadailyasia.com

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036
+1 212 537 8888
editor@chinadailyusa.com

China Daily Africa
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254 (0) 70 436 2812 (Nairobi)
editor@chinadailyafrica.com
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

Luo Jie



Opinion Line

Increasing soft power can usher in better prospects for world economy

A recent report released by the Brand Finance of the United Kingdom shows that China has overtaken the UK to rank second in the Global Soft Power Index 2025. It said China's growth in six of the eight soft power pillars and two-thirds of the indicators can be attributable to its promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, intensified efforts for sustainable development, and increasing influence of its domestic brands.

Thanks to numerous cooperation projects carried out under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has promoted infrastructure building and economic development in other countries involved in the initiative. China has also made remarkable achievements in artificial intelligence, renewable energy and space exploration.

The retrieval of lunar soil from the far side of the moon, the successful drilling of the first exploration well exceeding 10,000 meters in the deep earth field, and the rise of its AI start-up DeepSeek, all show China's

strength in scientific and technological innovation.

The increasing reach of Chinese films and music and the inclusion of China's Spring Festival in the list of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage all show the unique charm of Chinese culture.

China's economy contributes around 30 percent to world economic growth. The ever-increasing presence of Chinese companies across the world has promoted the effective allocation of global capital and contributed to the coordinated development of the world economy. The BRI projects across the world are playing an increasingly important role in promoting regional economic cooperation and global economic growth.

China's increasing soft power has promoted trade exchanges and cooperation with other countries. It helps lower trade barriers, expand market access, and promote global trade liberalization and facilitation. Countries around the world have also

begun realizing that China's huge production capacity and market demand are an important force driving the global economic recovery.

China's increased efforts for innovation and green development have provided useful reference for the green transformation and sustainable development of the global economy, and the extensive cooperation carried out by Chinese technology enterprises and research institutions with global counterparts have promoted scientific and technological progress and innovative development.

The significant improvement of China's soft power is inevitably reflected in the improvement of its hard power and in the innovation of its development model and concept, which has injected new impetus into the global economy. With the continuous improvement of China's soft power and the deepening of global cooperation, the world economy is expected to usher in better prospects.

— ECONOMIC DAILY

Narrowing the gap between air and space travel

A report about Chinese scientists successfully testing the world's first oblique detonation engine, powered by standard aviation kerosene, has, expectedly, made waves. But it is necessary to point out that the technology has greater potential for use in the civilian sector than for military purposes, unlike what some analysts are saying.

Findings of the research, which have been published in the Journal of Experiments in Fluid Mechanics show that the new engine can reach speeds of Mach 6-16, which is difficult for traditional air-aspirated engines to achieve.

Which means the new engine can propel planes to 16 times the speed of sound, which is roughly around 19,600 kilometers per hour.

Before the latest development, the world's fastest jet was the X-43, an experimental airplane developed by NASA in the early 2000s, which could soar at Mach 9.6, or 3.2 km per second. With Mach 16, which does 5.4 km per second, a plane would be approaching the 7.9 km per second it takes an object to travel in space. The newly developed oblique detonation engine could fill the speed gap between aeronautical and aerospace propulsion systems,

hopefully making air-space planes a reality soon.

As a South China Morning Post report rightly put it, the achievement marks "a potential game-changer in hypersonic propulsion that could redefine the limits of air and space travel". It's an aeroplane but it has the potential of changing the rules for space travel.

According to reports, JF12, a shock tunnel located in Beijing, is able to simulate conditions for aircraft to fly at greater Mach speeds. Hopefully, after more experiments there, an air-space plane might be a reality soon.

— ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Scaremongering smears targeting PLA won't stick

Hyping up the "military threat" of China not only helps the United States' commerce and trade departments to waywardly put Chinese companies on their blacklist citing their alleged connections with the Chinese military, but also enables the defense and security departments of the country to lobby the US lawmakers to increase their budgets.

That explains why President Donald Trump's nominee for deputy secretary of defense tried so hard to scaremonger that China's military is resolute on surpassing the United States, calling for fixing "significant" military shortages at a time when the administration is trying to make big budget cuts.

"China is incredibly determined, they feel a great sense of urgency, and they'll be fully dedicated to becoming the strongest nation in the world and having dominance over the United

States," Steve Feinberg told members of the Senate Armed Service Committee on Tuesday.

Feinberg, a businessman and investor, said the US military shortages include "shipbuilding, nuclear modernization, aircraft development, cyber defense, hypersonics, counter space, defending our satellites (and) counter drones".

Feinberg, and his like-minded colleagues that represent the US military-industrial complex, are good at fabricating and exaggerating security threats faced by the US.

"We really need to plug these shortages," he said. "If we don't, our very national security is at risk."

Feinberg should be reminded that not matter how fast the People's Liberation Army develops, China's commitment to its path of peaceful development and military policy of active defense remain

unchanged.

As a peace-loving nation, China never engages in aggression or expansion. But the PLA will take firm countermeasures against any threats and challenges to the country's legitimate rights and interests.

As the two countries are at "a new beginning" for their relations, the US side should discard its smearing of the Chinese military. The two militaries should strengthen their communication and carry out pragmatic cooperation on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation.

Deepening state-to-state and military-to-military exchanges and cooperation would not only serve the common interests of the two countries but also inject more certainty and positive energy into a turbulent world.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

COMMENT

Kimihiro Fukuyama

Dawn of a new era for China's IP industry

The beginning of this year witnessed China reaching two significant milestones, signaling a potential shift in its role on the global stage. The global release of DeepSeek, an advanced artificial model designed for complex reasoning and natural language processing, complete with its Chinese large language model (LLM), and the success of the animation film *Ne Zha 2* have triggered discussions on China's burgeoning intellectual property (IP) industry.

For decades, China had been seen as the "world's factory", producing a vast array of goods, from clothing to electronics, which people across the globe liked for their competitive prices and quality. But the recent developments mark a new departure for China, showcasing the advancements it has made, not in manufacturing, but in the realm of original intellectual property creation.

DeepSeek offers a new approach to developing cost-effective AI chatbots with promising open-source development, challenging the dominance of established close-sourced players in this field. Simultaneously, *Ne Zha 2*, along with the release of the much-anticipated video game *Black Myth: Wukong* last year, demonstrates China's growing capacity for creating compelling narratives and characters rooted in the country's culture. DeepSeek, *Ne Zha 2* and *Black Myth: Wukong* mark a potential turning point for the Chinese industry. They suggest a transition from a manufacturing-focused economy to one that values and cultivates creativity and innovation.

This emerging trend is intrinsically



This transition promises not only economic growth but also a richer cultural landscape, contributing to a more diverse and vibrant global creative ecosystem.

linked to China's industrial transformation over the past three decades, driven largely by the private sector. China's massive domestic market, with its almost 1 billion well-off mobile phone users, has fueled the growth of the mobile phone manufacturing industry and its associated app ecosystem. This technological expertise has been transferred to the electric vehicle (EV) and battery sectors, positioning China at the forefront of this rapidly expanding market. Chinese-made EVs and batteries are evolving into mobile entertainment hubs, mirroring the functionality of smartphones.

In these vehicles, users consume a variety of digital content, including movies, video games, and apps. This burgeoning digital landscape underscores the critical importance of robust intellectual property rights (IPR) protection. Creative tal-

ents, whether in software development, film production or game design, need assurance that their ideas and creations are legally well protected to foster innovation and investment.

To realize the full potential of this new era, China needs to nurture a vibrant ecosystem of programmers, creators, writers, artists, producers and filmmakers, which requires strategic investment in talent development, robust technological infrastructure and effective distribution networks. This echoes the trajectory of Japan, a country known for its prolific output of cultural products, including manga, anime, video games, films, and TV dramas. Japan's success demonstrates the power of a strong IPR protection framework in fostering a thriving creative economy.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, which both China and Japan are members of, with its emphasis on IPR, further reinforces the importance of IPR protection in international trade and collaboration.

Moreover, China's demography, characterized by a rapidly aging population, presents both challenges and opportunities. The increasing demand for eldercare solutions necessitates the development and deployment of AI-powered robots. Low-cost, AI-embedded robots are crucial for supporting China's vast population of 1.4 billion, as well as addressing similar needs in Japan, with its aging population of 125 million (World Bank, 2023). Japan's experience in using robotics and related technologies for eldercare offers valuable insights and potential collaboration

opportunities to China.

A partnership between China and Japan in this domain could lead to the development and global leadership of a new industry focused on assistive technologies and AI-driven solutions for aging societies. By combining China's manufacturing prowess and rapidly advancing AI capabilities with Japan's expertise in robotics and eldercare, the two countries can address their demographic challenges while simultaneously driving innovation and economic growth.

The rise of DeepSeek, the success of *Ne Zha 2*, and last year's anticipation surrounding *Black Myth: Wukong* are not isolated incidents. They represent a broader trend, a shift toward a knowledge-based economy where creativity and innovation are valued and protected. China's journey from the "world's factory" to a creator of original intellectual property is just beginning.

By investing in its creative talents, strengthening its IPR protection framework, and fostering international collaborations, particularly with countries like Japan, China can consolidate its position as a global leader in the IP industry. This transition promises not only economic growth but also a richer cultural landscape, contributing to a more diverse and vibrant global creative ecosystem.

The author is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Management, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



Chen Weihua

The author is chief of China Daily EU Bureau based in Brussels. chenweihua@chinadaily.com.cn

For EU, freeing itself from US is no easy task

The first 40 days of the new Donald Trump administration have caused panic across the European Union, leaving EU leaders thinking how to maintain the bloc's relevance and global standing without the support of the United States.

Germany's likely next chancellor Friedrich Merz emphasized after his party coalition won the elections on Sunday that his "absolute priority will be to strengthen the EU as quickly as possible", adding that "step by step, we can really achieve independence from the USA".

It was a rare public acknowledgement by a European leader that the EU is not independent, at least in defense and security. Germany hosts some 40 US military bases and more than 35,000 US troops, by far the highest in Europe.

Achieving "strategic autonomy" was what some EU politicians were talking about a few years ago. But they stopped doing so after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict three years ago when all signs indicated the EU's extreme dependence on the US for security. That's why some EU leaders who advocate for EU strategic autonomy applauded Trump's tough stance toward the bloc; their contention being it will force the EU to free itself of the US in terms of defense and foreign policy.

But the EU forgot that lesson quickly after the Joe Biden administration warmed up to Brussels in its bid to use and abuse the bloc to further its hostile strategy toward China.

Some EU leaders, however, still hope to win back Trump's support, by offering various compromises and flattering the US administration, or even indecent proposals.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas and French President Emmanuel Macron have both asked the US to focus on its trade conflict with China, not the EU. It was shocking to see Macron make such an indecent proposal, because he once championed EU strategic autonomy.

There is no doubt the EU's China policy has long been dictated by the US. American and European officials, past and present, have admitted such "coordination", or openly allowed Washington to dictate the EU's policy toward China. This also explains why China-EU relations have become more turbulent over the past years.

That, incidentally, was what prompted Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares to tell the Financial Times early this week that the EU should work out its own China policy and not ape the Trump administration's confrontational stance toward China.

Jeffrey Sachs, an economist and a professor at Columbia University, told me after his speech in the European Parliament in Brussels on Feb 19 that Europe needs to wake up, and not have only a US foreign policy but also devise its own foreign policy. Sachs said this means that the EU should have good relations with China in the fields of trade and investment, and establish a partnership between China's Belt and Road Initiative and the EU's Global Gateway, all of which will have win-win outcomes.

The EU learned a hard lesson during the first Trump administration, when the US imposed punitive tariffs on the bloc and threatened to punish EU companies conducting business with Iran following the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. But the EU forgot that lesson quickly after the Joe Biden administration warmed up to Brussels in its bid to use and abuse the bloc to further its hostile strategy toward China.

So when Merz complained that "the Americans, at least this part of the Americans in this administration, are largely indifferent to the fate of Europe", I wondered if the "independence" he referred to will be irrelevant once another Democratic government takes office in the US.

European Commission spokespersons have dismissed my concerns over the past years when I've asked about the consequences of certain policies and actions the EU implemented under US pressure, including the ban on Huawei 5G.

If you have been following the US, the EU, G7 and NATO leaders on X (formerly Twitter) during the past years, you must have noticed that their messages, on many issues, and the timing of those messages, were almost the same.

Indeed, the EU can achieve strategic independence only gradually, as Merz said, but the real question is whether the EU is really determined to wean itself from Washington, and have an independent China policy.

Li Cong and Li Minglai

AI pivotal to modernizing agriculture

The No 1 Central Document of the Communist Party of China Central Committee for 2025 emphasized that developing "new quality productive forces" in agriculture suitable to local conditions is pivotal to rural vitalization. The central authorities will support the development of smart agriculture and a digital countryside, while helping increase the application of technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data in agriculture.

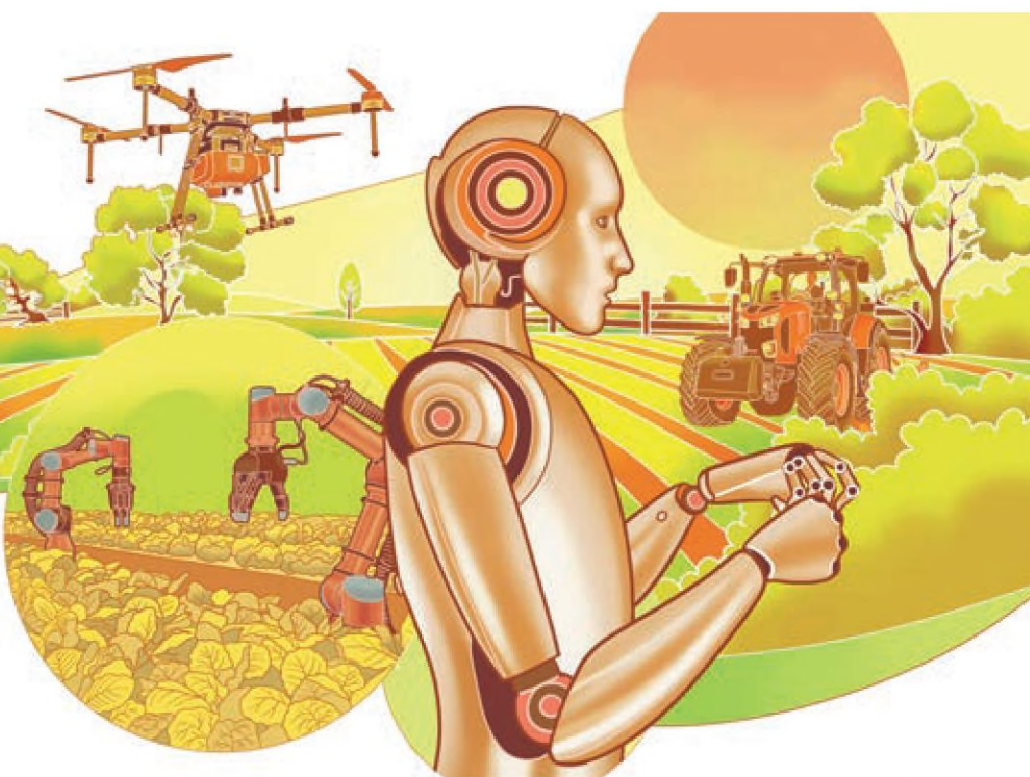
The document also emphasizes the importance of better protecting arable land and increasing food production. In light of the recent developments in AI technology, including homegrown DeepSeek, the policy document has provided top-level design support for the in-depth application of AI technology in agriculture.

AI has the potential to resolve the structural contradictions facing traditional agriculture, such as labor shortage and low resource utilization, by optimizing resource allocation and boosting total factor productivity. AI can foster an agricultural revolution by leveraging data elements as a carrier to transform the technological dividend of urban society into a driving force for rural development, thereby promoting integrated urban-rural development.

In recent years, China's rapidly rising aging population and intensifying "hollowing out" of rural areas — the exodus of young workers from the countryside — have created a pressing problem: who will cultivate the land. Agricultural machinery powered by AI has emerged as a tool to mitigate the labor shortage and alleviate the aging demographic strain in rural regions.

The development of intelligent agricultural machinery and equipment is a key focus of China's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs; it is part of the ministry's strategy to advance agricultural technology. At the 21st China International Agricultural Trade Fair, held in Guangzhou late last year, agricultural robots including those for picking lychees, and harvesting pineapples and dragon fruits were displayed. These emerging technology tools are designed to perform labor-intensive tasks, enabling automated planting and harvesting.

AI also has huge potential for advancing smart agriculture. For instance, the document highlights the need to promote the beef and dairy cattle industries. To achieve this goal, Gangbei district of Guigang city in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region is developing "intelligent animal husbandry". It has established five intelligent pig farms, including the Xinghe AI pig farm, which has an automatic ventilation and temperature control sys-



JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

tem, automatic manure scraping machinery, an automatic mechanical feed conveyor system, and an AI inspection system. As a result, its pig rearing capacity has increased from 400-500 heads to 4,000-5,000 heads, and feeding costs have reduced by more than 20 percent.

Also, the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences and Alibaba have jointly developed a smart breeding platform, which efficiently manages, schedules and analyzes big data on breeding using AI algorithms, thereby offering new possibilities for cultivating superior crop varieties.

The No 1 Document has also set a goal — of stabilizing the grain growing areas and increasing production and quality — necessitating the need for AI-driven advancements in smart planting and farming technologies.

In the development of the agricultural industry chain, AI technology is poised to help optimize the supply chains, unlock the value-added potential of farm products, and empower farmers to enjoy the industry's value-added benefits. For instance, Chongqing has developed the *Nongpinhui* platform, leveraging AI technology to precisely balance the supply and demand of agricultural products. Since its launch, the platform has facilitated 201,000 transactions, helping farm-

ers generate more than 5.9 billion yuan (\$814 million) in income and address issues related to stagnant marketing of farm products.

In Lingshan county, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, AI technology is being used to achieve digital upgrading across the entire production, supply and marketing chains in the lychee industry. The county has established a digital public warehouse, offering services such as grading, packaging, preservation and logistics for lychees and other farm products. Consequently, the total output value of the industrial chain has surpassed 3 billion yuan.

The document also highlights the importance of establishing specialized agricultural clusters and enhancing the level of industrialization in agriculture. The extensive application of AI in the digital transformation of the agricultural sector and rural e-commerce and other fields will greatly contribute to agricultural prosperity.

However, the widespread adoption and implementation of AI technology in agriculture come with a range of challenges and limitations. First, farmers face a "digital divide" due to lack of digital literacy. Second, the potential leakage of farmland data poses a threat to national security.

And third, the huge procurement costs of AI equipment can be a big financial burden on farmers.

To advance the integration of AI technology in agriculture, therefore, the authorities should include AI skills training into the new vocational farmer training course, in order to enhance farmers' digital proficiency. They should also establish a tiered protection framework for agricultural data to ensure the transmission of sensitive information is securely encrypted.

Moreover, the authorities need to encourage and support the emergence of new agricultural management entities, the establishment of intelligent agricultural industrial parks, and leverage the rural collective economy to increase the adoption of intelligent agricultural equipment. By doing so, they will help AI become the pivotal force boosting agricultural efficiency, invigorating rural areas, increasing farmers' incomes — and advancing Chinese modernization of agriculture and the countryside.

Li Cong is a professor at the School of Economics and Finance at Xi'an Jiaotong University; and Li Minglai is a PhD candidate at the same school. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

GLOBAL VIEWS



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

JANUSZ PIECHOCIŃSKI

On the right track

The New Silk Road rail link is an increasingly strong bond for China-Europe cooperation

In 2024, many Central and Eastern European countries celebrated 75th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations with China. Conversation, compromise and cooperation are the correct reading of the underpinnings of the various dimensions of the relations and contacts between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe over the past 75 years.



In 2012, the first meeting at the level of heads of government of the Central and Eastern European countries and China took place in Warsaw, which officially marked the beginning of the China-CEEC cooperation formula.

In 2013, during official visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative, one of the world's most ambitious infrastructure initiatives, intended to connect countries with economic corridors. Since then, China has strategically targeted countries from East Asia to Europe, using the Belt and Road infrastructure projects to increase global, regional and bilateral cooperation. In less than a decade, dozens of countries have joined the initiative, collectively representing over one-third of global GDP and two-thirds of the world's population. This includes transnational and regional cooperation among countries involved in the BRI, macro-level policy exchanges, intergovernmental cooperation, coordination of communications between countries, trade, and political support for large infrastructure projects.

Since 1990, the percentage of the world's population living in extreme poverty has fallen by three-fourths. At the heart of this great achievement in human prosperity has been a 20-fold increase in the volume of international trade and deepening cooperation. This economic vision is now under attack and its achievements are at risk.

A series of shocks over the past 15 years — the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis — have created an alternative narrative about globalization. According to this new line of thinking, globalization, instead of strengthening countries economically, exposes them to excessive risk. Economic interdependence is no longer seen as an advantage, it is seen at the heights of world politics as a great disadvantage.

Now we hear: what countries need is not free markets and interdependence, but independence and widespread self-sufficiency among a small group of political and economic allies.

The pandemic and the Ukraine crisis, as well as the misdefining of raw material and technological constraints, have exposed real weaknesses in global trade, causing product shortages and supply bottlenecks that harm both businesses and households. Talk of "separation" has become common. Governments are introducing an increasing number of export and import restrictions, especially on goods considered strategically important, such as semiconductors and critical minerals.

Now, for the economies of Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, the Ukraine crisis, the subsequent sanctions on Russia and



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tensions in international trade have created difficulties, and increases in transport costs pose new challenges. Statistical data proves the scale and impact on the regional economy of Poland and the region. Since the China-Europe freight train service was launched in 2011, the number of trains from China to Europe on the intermodal Belt and Road have exceeded

100,000, which have transported over 11 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), with goods worth over \$420 billion. The development of intermodal rail transport between China and Europe has been an impetus for many logistics investments in countries located along transport routes. Thanks to infrastructure modernization and expansion of tranship-

ment terminals, as well as improvements in customs and administrative procedures, the time needed to complete 10,000 train journeys on the Belt and Road has been reduced from over seven years to just half a year now. This means that the rail route has become a real alternative to sea transport from China to Europe.

Currently, trains run among over 100 cities in 11 Asian countries and 227 cities in 25 European countries. China-Europe rail freight volumes continue their upward trajectory from 2023, recording an 11 percent rebound year-on-year in the first half of 2024. During this period, the New Silk Road rail link transported approximately 1.23 million TEUs in over 11,400 freight trains. The number of trains that ran on railway routes connecting China with Europe in 2024 exceeded 10,000. In 2024, it happened 19 days earlier than in 2023. In 2024, it happened at the beginning of July. From July to September 2024, container trains from China to Europe transported 690,000 metric tons of cargo — 118 percent more than in 2023.

Most of the transport goes to Poland, mainly to the Malaszewicze logistics hub. Poland is also the country that recorded the largest increase in cargo volume on the Belt and Road route. In the third quarter of 2024, trains from China to Poland transported 93,300 TEUs, which means an increase of as much as 221 percent. At the same time, 3,412 TEUs were transported to Germany (an increase of 35.7 percent), 1,178 TEUs to Hungary (an increase of 33.86 percent), and 540 TEUs to the Netherlands.

From January to September 2024, 227,656 TEUs arrived in Poland, 154 percent more than last

year, and 21,000 TEUs were transported to Germany (an increase of 120 percent).

The above-mentioned effects of cooperation only in international rail transport show the potential and importance of cooperation between China and EU countries, especially Poland. It is also worth recalling that over 30 percent of Polish imports from China constitute supply imports for the Polish industry. There are hundreds of large companies with Chinese capital operating in Poland and over 3,500 small companies are run by Chinese citizens, and thousands of Polish companies are taking steps to enter the Chinese market. Of course, we should not be satisfied with these numbers, and unfortunately, there has been too little action on the Polish side. Poland should care more about reducing tensions in international relations and expanding good cooperation not only at the level of diplomacy and politics, but also as the consistent work of its administration, business and its organizations.

The Polish business community hopes that during the Polish presidency of the EU, it will be possible to significantly improve EU-China cooperation, create stable conditions for its development and strengthen the positive dialogue between the EU and China.

The author is chairman of Poland-Asia Chamber of Industry and Commerce and former deputy prime minister and minister of Economy of Poland. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

ZHANG JIAN

Time to break free of dependency

The EU needs to develop an independent foreign policy that is not under the sway of Washington or it will become an increasingly spent force

The United States is the largest third-party factor in China-Europe relations, exerting its influence over the relationship by intervening in the European Union's China policy. Now that Donald Trump has begun his second term as president, Washington's significant policy shifts are



poised to deeply impact the trajectory of China-EU relations.

The US has long viewed China as its primary strategic competitor. In addition to its across-the-board efforts to contain and suppress China, Washington is pressuring the EU to join it in obstructing pragmatic China-EU cooperation. This includes pressuring the EU to make efforts to curb China's high-value manufacturing industries and to reduce its economic ties with China. The EU has its own considerations and interests in its China policy, which do not always align with those of the US. However, the bloc has repeatedly yielded to US pressure, making decisions that harm its own interests. For example, Brussels has limited the use of Huawei's 5G products, banned the export of high-tech items such as ASML's chip manufacturing equipment to China, introduced overly politicized and security-driven "de-risking" policies, and aligned with the US "Indo-Pacific" strategy, with the bloc deploying warships to the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait under the guise of "freedom of navigation", and increasing its exchanges with the island of Taiwan.

While some of these policies have been driven by internal factors within the EU, the pressure from the US has been the primary driv-

ing force. These moves, which align with US interests, have damaged the EU's own interests and brought about new risks to its economic and social development. Such practices have cut exports and jobs, stunted economic growth, and increased the EU's likelihood of being "caught up in crises that are not ours".

Over the past four years, the previous Joe Biden administration sought to draw the EU closer to the US, and the bloc increasingly accommodated the Biden administration. Brussels hoped that Washington would pay more attention to its security interests; that it could leverage the US to overcome the EU's economic difficulties; and that the US would continue to exercise global leadership to safeguard Western interests.

However, with the start of Trump's second term, Europe's hopes have been dashed, and it could even find itself in a position where even if it desires to be a US "vassal" but fails to be one. During his first term, Trump regarded the EU as a "foe", and since the start of his second term, Washington's policies have clearly sidelined, ignored and harmed Europe. For instance, on the issue that Europe values most — the Ukraine crisis — Trump bypassed both Europe and Ukraine to hold direct talks with Russia, adopting a policy that, from Europe's perspective, seemed to favor Russia and undermine Ukrainian and European security. Furthermore, senior US officials have directly interfered in European domestic affairs by supporting the far-right parties against Europe's mainstream political parties, claiming that Europe's biggest threat is the internal erosion of democracy. Trump also declared that he would not rule out using force to acquire Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory of Denmark

which is both a member of the EU and NATO. He has also threatened to impose tariffs on EU products, calling the EU's trade practices an "atrocious". The Trump administration also announced the US' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization, as well as sanctions on the International Criminal Court, among other actions. All these moves, from Europe's point of view, have undermined its interests and values.

Thus, despite Europe's preparation for Trump's potential re-election, the series of policies since the start of his second term have nonetheless been a significant shock to Europe. How Europe will respond, and the bloc's future course, have become unavoidable and pressing questions.

One possibility is that Europe will further accommodate the US, increasingly surrendering to US demands — losing more of its autonomy and independence, ultimately becoming a US "vassal" as French President Emmanuel Macron fears. This cannot be ruled out entirely, given that, compared to 2016 when Trump was first elected, the EU is now in a much weaker position, lacking internal unity and leadership. The gap between the EU and the US in economic, financial, technological and military power has grown wider, and Europe's dependence on the US has deepened. Europe, to a larger extent than before, finds itself swept into the US' global strategy, making it more difficult to say "no" to the US than ever before. At present, Europe is still observing, holding out hope for the second Trump administration, and emphasizing the benefits of the transatlantic alliance and NATO for the US. Some countries and politicians are attempting to play the China card, sacrificing China-EU relations to

cater to US interests.

However, there is also another possibility — that Europe will fully recognize the unreliability and selfishness of the US, fully acknowledging the necessity and urgency of achieving strategic autonomy. Faced with pressure, Europe could unite further and seek to push for strategic autonomy. An undeniable fact is that for Europe, the US will become even more unreliable in the future. Increasingly, Europeans are coming to see the US not as an ally but as a potential adversary. Under these circumstances, Europe's perception of China and its policies could take on a different perspective.

For a long time, China's policy toward Europe has been consistent, stable and predictable — supporting European integration, backing Europe's strategic autonomy, and maintaining a comprehensive strategic partnership with the EU. Over the past few years, however, China-EU relations have seen some negative shifts. These changes are not due to any shift in China's policy, but rather because of shifts in the EU's approach to China. In 2019, the EU adopted its three-sided definition of China — a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. However, this positioning has been full of contradictions and is increasingly leaning toward the latter two, damaging both China-EU relations and Europe's own interests. The shift in Europe's position on China can be attributed to changes within Europe's economy, society, and politics, but undoubtedly, the US has played a significant role in this shift.

Today, the US is becoming a comprehensive challenge, rival, and even a threat to Europe in economic, political and diplomatic domains. The transatlantic alliance is unraveling, and it is unlikely to be



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restored in the future. In order to better safeguard its own development and security interests, Europe needs to develop an independent foreign policy, including its policy toward China, free from US interference.

In the current climate, China's domestic and foreign policies are increasingly stable and predictable, underscoring their significance for both Europe and the world. The common interests between China and Europe are becoming more prominent. Both China and the EU need a stable and predictable global economic and trade order, and both sides should promote each other's economic and social development through open trade policies, as opposed to protectionism. Together, they can also set an example for global trade, bringing certainty to the global economy. Both sides need to support global multipolarity and multilateralism, uphold the international system and order cen-

tered around the United Nations, and oppose unilateral hegemonic policies. Additionally, both China and the EU must intensify efforts to combat climate change. In conclusion, cooperation should be the dominant theme of China-EU relations, and more cooperation in more fields and at deeper levels is needed. This serves the interests of both sides and contributes to global stability and development. Trump's second term presents challenges for China, Europe and the world, but it also brings more opportunities for cooperation — opportunities that the EU should seize in its pursuit of strategic autonomy and European sovereignty.

The author is vice-president of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

CULTURAL HERITAGE



Above: A bird's-eye view of the Wangjiazui area of Zhouyuan Site, in Baoji, Shaanxi province, with the No 1 building (left) dating back over 3,000 years. **Top left, middle and right:** Some relics of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-771 BC) that were excavated from the Zhouyuan Site: an oracle bone with inscription recording a Zhou king's assembling order for vassal state leaders; pottery vessels; and a fragment of bronze ware.

A plain that echoes with legends

New discoveries at the Zhouyuan Site in Shaanxi province shed light on key period in early formation of China, **Wang Kaihao** reports.

The overwhelming popularity of the animated film *Ne Zha 2* has piqued public interest in its source material, the 16th-century classic *Fengshen Yanyi* (Investiture of the Gods).

If one strips away its mythical veil — an act that in European terms is akin to stripping away the mythology surrounding the Trojan War — it is possible to question the historical reality behind the depiction of King Wu's decision to overthrow the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC). But how did the Zhou leader rise to become the "supreme ruler of all under heaven" depicted in the story?

Recent archaeological studies in Baoji, Shaanxi province, have gradually helped the heroic saga emerge from myth, revealing its true form. From at least the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-771 BC) and even earlier, clues existed about the way power was incubated during this pivotal period of early Chinese history.

The Zhouyuan Site covers about 33 square kilometers. As its name, which means "plain of Zhou", indicates, this tableland to the south of the Qishan Mountains has long been seen as key to decoding Zhou culture. Archaeological research began here as early as 1942 and large-scale excavations were conducted twice in 1980 and 2000.

"However, archaeologists still lacked high-level remains from the pre-Zhou culture, and the layout of settlements could not be clearly seen," says Chong Jianrong, director of the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology.

"Pre-Zhou" refers to the period when the Zhou still paid allegiance to the Shang Dynasty and prospered in present-day Shaanxi, before taking up arms against the Shang ruler and replaced it. The last Shang king was notorious in history for his cruelty and debauchery.

Chong's mission has been to find the physical evidence to fill in concise historical descriptions.

He says that in recent years, exploration of the Zhouyuan Site has focused on uncovering the settlement structure of the Shang and

Western Zhou periods.

By emphasizing the search for wall systems and large-scale buildings belonging to pre-Zhou culture, through extensive tracking, drilling and targeted excavations at key sites, researchers have discovered a large pre-Zhou rammed earth building complex in Wangjiazui in the southwest of the site.

"For a long time, many scholars believed that Zhouyuan is where the ancestors of the Zhou people settled after moving to the Qishan Mountains," Chong explains. "But some questions remain unanswered due to lack of clear evidence."

Now, a belt of large rammed earth pre-Zhou structures has been discovered. It runs 150 meters from north to south, and two large buildings have been fully unearthed.

The No 1 building is composed of a gatehouse, east and west wing rooms, front hall, rear chamber, and front and rear courtyards. It occupies an area of some 2,500 square meters.

"It is the largest and most complete large-scale pre-Zhou rammed earth building discovered to date, and provides crucial evidence that confirms speculation that Zhouyuan was the Zhou capital at the time," Chong adds.

City of wonders

Last week, the findings from Zhouyuan were included in the Top 6 List of New Archaeological Discoveries of 2024, which was released by the Institute of Archaeology with Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Recent physical evidence also indicates a truth: This "capital city" not only functioned as a center from which the Zhou ended a chaotic era and overthrew Shang rule, it also continued to prosper as a hub ruling over a vast territory after the war.

Chong's team also discovered triple-layered city walls dating to the Western Zhou Dynasty, a palace city that occupies 500,000 sq m, a "small" 1.75-square-kilometer city around it, and a "large" city that covers a further 5.2 sq km.



Above: An imagery picture of the southern gate of the palace city on Zhouyuan Site, based on archaeological findings.



Left: A moat ruin by the southern wall of the palace city. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

It is the biggest Western Zhou city ruin ever found. So far, the southern gate of the palace city and the eastern gate of the "large" city have been excavated. Chong says they reveal the "aura of a king's capital", as the grand scale and complex structures were not only impressive for its time, but would still have been extraordinary compared to other cities a few centuries later.

For example, the "large" city gate tower is 95 meters long and 10 meters thick. Entry roads into the city were more than 30 meters wide and linked to a network of urban traffic. Fortified barbicans can be

seen on both gate ruins.

Outside the western wall of the palace city, there is a north-south road with a three-layered surface. The two lower layers are paved with large stones and small, densely packed pebbles. Wheel ruts are still visible. Along the edge of the wall, archaeologists have also found pottery drainage pipes.

"The findings not only advance our understanding of the form and nature of the Zhouyuan settlement, but also provide indispensable research material for the history of urban development in China," Chong says.

Now 206 oracle bones, including 29 inscribed with characters, have recently been unearthed at Zhouyuan. The inscriptions include those related to astronomy, calendar systems, historical geography, military warfare, and numerical divination.

For Chong, one inscription recording a Zhou king's assembly order for vassal state leaders is particularly important. "It directly indicates the royal nature of these oracle bones," he explains. "The order reveals the relationship between central kingship and the vassal states of the Western Zhou."

Many crucial names of people and places can be seen in these rare objects. One character, *qin*, attracted the attention of researchers. It is the oldest-known record of the Qin, who rose from being a marginal group to dominate the trajectory of Chinese history. Its leader, Ying Zheng, united China and became the first Chinese emperor, Qinshihuang, in 221 BC.

"These oracle bones can be clearly dated, and contain valuable information, making them rare documents in the study of Western Zhou history," Chong says.

According to Xu Lianggao, a researcher at the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Western Zhou Dynasty may have had multiple capital cities. Historical records also mention different names for the Zhou. "What relationships exist between these versions of the Zhou? It could also be differences in functional nature. Recent findings at Zhouyuan may provide key answers," Xu says.

Lei Xingshan, an archaeology professor at Beijing Union University, says that the Xia (c. 21st century-16th century BC), Shang and Zhou (c. 11th century-256 BC) dynasties, dubbed "the Three Dynasties", marked the crucial period in the early stages in nation formation.

"It has always been a focus of Chinese archaeology. Zhouyuan stands out as an example that reflects how various cultures merge in Chinese civilization," Lei says.

Contact the writer at wangkaihao@chinadaily.com.cn

By WANG RU and SHI BAOYIN in Anyang, Henan province

Yinxu's young museum a big draw for the nation

Since opening to the public on Feb 26 last year, the Yinxu Museum in Anyang, Henan province, China's first comprehensive archaeology museum dedicated to the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC), has embraced the enthusiasm with which it has been greeted, and has become a new calling card for the city.

Receiving over 1.8 million visits in 2024, its popularity made a huge splash in China's museum circle last year.

A series of activities marking this anniversary was held in Anyang between Tuesday and Thursday, including lectures, seminars and performances related to Shang civilization.

To celebrate the occasion, a new exhibition, *The Show of King's*

Return: The Inscribed Oracle Bone Collections of Tianjin Museum Back to the Great Settlement Shang, kicked off on Wednesday, with a display of 36 inscribed oracle bones that were discovered at the Yinxu Ruins in the late 19th century.

Directly related to Wu Ding, a Shang Dynasty king, this was the first time these bones, now part of the Tianjin Museum collection, returned to the place from where they were unearthed.

Oracle bone inscriptions, used for fortune-telling and recording, compose the earliest-known established writing system in China. In 2017, the inscriptions were listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register program.

"Oracle bone inscriptions can

now be found in more than 200 institutes around the world. In my heart, they are living and want to return to their origins in Anyang. I believe even a brief stay here will bring them comfort. Although this wish seemed difficult to fulfill, it has finally come true," says Song Zhenhao, an oracle bone expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Named after the nearby Yinxu Ruins, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the museum is a display



An inscribed oracle bone on display in Yinxu Museum. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

of the highest civilizational achievements of China during the Bronze Age through more than 4,000 artifacts, including bronze, pottery and jade vessels, and oracle bone inscriptions, according to Shi Jin-song, deputy director of the Institute of Archaeology with the CASS, and also acting director of the museum.

Shi says that Yinxu occupies an important place in the birth and development of archaeology in China. First excavated in

1928, it is the country's longest studied ancient capital city as excavations continue to this day. It is also a cradle for its most famous archaeologists, many of whom left footprints at the site during their careers.

"At the museum, we can see the beginning and development of archaeology in China, the evolution of ideas, methods and techniques. We can also see the exploration and achievements of Chinese archaeologists," Shi says.

Archaeologist Wang Wei highlights the performance over the past year. "Undoubtedly, this is a good museum, as it provides understandable content to even middle school students and arouses their interest not merely through text, but well-designed displays," Wang says.

"The artifacts leave a lasting impression on visitors since they are introduced in the most straightforward and effective manner. I believe it has taken a leading position among China's museums."

He Yuling, head of the Anyang workstation affiliated to the Institute of Archaeology with the CASS, says Yinxu Museum may just have celebrated its first birthday, but the Yinxu Ruins date back some 3,000 years.

Consequently, the young institution still has a long way to go to fully illustrate the history and culture it contains.

"The museum has an inexhaustible vitality as we are constantly introducing artifacts and archaeological achievements fresh from the site," He says.

Contact the writers at wangru@chinadaily.com.cn

LIFESHANGHAI



Left: Wu Husheng in the Shanghai Ballet production of *The Lady of the Camellias*. Middle: He and partner in the Shanghai Ballet's production of *A Sigh of Love*. Right: Wu in *The White-Haired Girl*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Celebration of 10th anniversary on pointe

Lead principal dancer and deputy director reflects on his career with one of China's greatest ballet companies as it stages adaptation of *Swan Lake*, Zhang Kun reports.

As the Shanghai Ballet celebrates the 10th anniversary of its *Swan Lake* production of the Shanghai Grand Theatre on Feb 15, Wu Husheng, the lead principal dancer and deputy director of the company, shared his experiences with the show and his career as the leading dancer in one of China's greatest ballet companies.

Swan Lake, which was composed by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, is arguably one of the most popular ballets in the world. Shanghai Ballet's *Swan Lake* was choreographed by British artist Derek Deane. In 2015, Deane created a new version for the company, featuring an unprecedented ensemble of 48 swans, double the usual 24.

Over the past 10 years, this deluxe production has toured extensively around China, Europe, the United States, Australia, and other parts of the world. In 2020, it debuted at Lincoln Center in New York, and in 2023, the Shanghai Ballet made its fourth tour of Europe, with 36 performances in four cities in the Netherlands, performing for over 70,000 attendees.

"The first few performances are usually challenging — dancers fall asleep when having their makeup done because they haven't recovered from jet lag," Wu says about the international tours when he danced in up to 20 shows. The most difficult part, however, is when half the tour is completed.

"By this time, the whole ensemble is exhausted, but there is still a long way to go," he told China Daily backstage before the production's anniversary performance at the Shanghai Grand Theatre. "Now that I have taken an administrative position, I pay attention to my fellow dancers and care about their physical and mental well-being.



Above: Wu and Qi Bingxue at the performance celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Shanghai Ballet's version of *Swan Lake*. Left: Wu in *The Phantom of the Opera*.

"I tend to think too much. If I notice a technical problem and can't get my moves right, I am so troubled that I cannot sleep at night. Sometimes I keep on doing the moves in my apartment. It's not helpful at all because there isn't enough space and I can injure myself easily."

Such obsession and persistence can sometimes become a burden. Wu is happy that caring for others

has helped him divert his focus so that he can dance with renewed ease onstage. "I surprised myself by making improvements with my dancing."

At 39, he maintains his passion for dancing, and hopes to gradually "shift his focus onto administrative work and choreography instead of retiring from the stage and quitting dancing completely".

Wu began taking ballet classes when he was 9 and joined the Shanghai Ballet at 17. He made rapid progress in the company, and was promoted to principal dancer several years after that. In 2007, he won best male dancer at the New York International Ballet Competition, as well as the special jury award named after Igor Youskevitch, co-founder of the competition.

"At that time, many people thought I would pursue an international career instead of returning to Shanghai," Wu says. "But I returned and managed to build an international career at the Shanghai Ballet, working with some of the best international choreographers and talents."

Dancers grow and improve through the portrayal of different characters and collaboration with other partners, says Xin Lili, artistic director of the Shanghai Ballet. The company was founded in 1979 and developed from the performance team of *The White-Haired Girl*, which debuted in 1964 as China's first original ballet production.

Adding Chinese context to ballet and creating new Chinese content remains the core mission of the Shanghai Ballet, Wu says.

Through the decades, Wu has played the male lead for almost all of the Shanghai Ballet's major productions, such as *The White-Haired Girl*, *The Nutcracker*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*, a large number of

which were created by leading international choreographers.

One of the more important productions for Wu was *A Sigh of Love*, choreographed and directed by French artist Bertrand d'At (1957-2014).

The production was loosely based on the film *In the Mood for Love* by Hong Kong-based filmmaker Wong Kar-wai, with the story moved to Shanghai in the 1930s.

"It was the first time I played the hero in a new original production. I was very involved in the creation, as the director needed to seek inspiration from the actors.

"The dance moves were tailor-made on my physical condition, so it suits me very well, and I really enjoyed the creative process," he says. The show, which premiered in 2006, has become one of the most enduring in the repertoires of Shanghai Ballet, and was performed at the Hong Kong Arts Festival last year.

During the 10th-anniversary celebration of its production of *Swan Lake*, the Shanghai Ballet introduced three pairs of dancers for the lead roles of Prince Siegfried and Odette. Wu and his partner Qi Bingxue, being the mature pair, are followed by Tu Hanbin with Feng Zichun, and Xu Jingkun with Guo Wenjin.

Wu finds Asian dancers making great progress in the global ballet scene and attributes this to advanced training methods and frequent international communication. He also notices a shift in the criteria for international ballet competitions that emphasize the dancers' ability to convey their passion to the audience and present their true emotions and individuality through dance.

Contact the writer at zhangkun@chinadaily.com.cn

Retrospective remembers a true contemporary Renaissance man

By ZHANG KUN

The Museum of Art Pudong announced its first significant exhibition of 2025 — *Chen Yifei: A Retrospective on Art and Legacy* — featuring one of China's most important contemporary artists, who passed away in Shanghai 20 years ago.

Running from April 26 to Oct 12, the retrospective will present some of the late artist's most renowned paintings, along with sketches and sculptures while also highlighting his achievements in filmmaking, fashion, and environmental design.

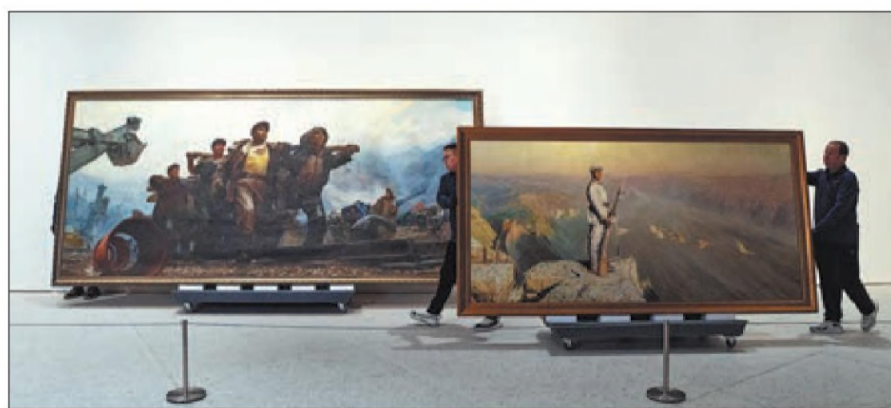
Chen (1946-2005) was a well-regarded artist, art director and film director. One of the central figures in the development of oil painting in China, he is a representative artist of contemporary China and an indispensable figure in Shanghai's cultural scene, who is "destined to claim his position in the art history of China and the world", says Chen Xiejun, former director of Shanghai Museum and the exhibition's academic director. "Chen Yifei is an extraordinary

artist of global impact, widely loved by the public. Many of us are still pained by his early demise 20 years ago," says Li Minkun, chairperson of the museum. "It is of great importance to the city's cultural scene that we bring together his most recognized masterpieces from all over the world for this retrospective."

At the museum's news conference on Feb 17, four paintings were unveiled, offering a glimpse of the upcoming exhibition. The first, *Ode to the Yellow River*, was painted in 1972 and inspired by the piano concerto of the same title.

The second painting, *The Pioneer*, was a collaboration between Chen Yifei and Wei Jingshan, featuring the construction of the first trunk railway between Chengdu, Sichuan province, and Chongqing after the founding of New China in 1949.

The third, *Lady with the Birdcage*, was painted in 1992 and is part of the series *Old Dream of Shanghai*, in which the artist "used the codes of Western academic realism to celebrate the very essence of traditional Chinese femininity", according to art critic Herve Lancelin.



The Museum of Art Pudong unveils paintings by late artist Chen Yifei for the announcement of *Chen Yifei: A Retrospective on Art and Legacy* that will run from April 26 to Oct 12. GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY

The fourth painting, *My Neighbors*, which features the old-time rural neighborhood lifestyle, was shipped from London to Shanghai.

Chen Yifei was born in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, and moved to Shanghai with his parents as a child, where he received training in real-

ism in Shanghai and was influenced by Russian art. In the 1960s, he began to draw attention for his heroic realism paintings that often featured glorified depictions of soldiers, workers, and historical events during the Chinese revolution.

In 1980, he was among the first

artists to go abroad as China opened up to the world. He studied and worked in the United States until returning to Shanghai in 1990. During this period, he created many masterpieces that were later widely written about, including a series of classical music performances, music

If you go

Chen Yifei: A Retrospective on Art and Legacy
April 26-Oct 12, 10 am-9 pm (last admission at 8 pm)
Museum of Art Pudong, 2777 Binjiang Avenue, Pudong New Area, Shanghai.

scenes featuring traditional Chinese instruments, Chinese attire and decorations, and landscapes of water towns in the Yangtze River Delta.

Chen Yifei was also one of the first artists in China to propose the "greater art" concept and put his ideas into practice. In the latter period of his career, he founded an art and lifestyle magazine, a fashion brand, and played an active role in the landscape design and urban planning of Shanghai's Pudong New Area.

Chen Yifei was also fascinated with filmmaking and directed feature films before dying of liver disease while working on his last movie *The Music Box*, which was released in 2006.

LIFE



From left: Ma Wendong, a China-Europe freight train driver, at the helm. Ma and his deputy handle procedures before embarking on a new trip. The two gather implements before boarding.
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Romance blossoms for train driver

Felicitous encounter with Thai student leads to life of happiness, breaking the speed of loneliness, **Xu Fan** reports.

Dumplings, family feasts, and fireworks — these are the hallmarks of Spring Festival. But for Ma Wendong, a 29-year-old freight train driver in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, this year's holiday celebrating the Year of the Snake was one of his busiest periods of work.

As dawn broke, Ma left his home and traveled 40 kilometers to Xinfeng, a town in eastern Xi'an. There, at a local railway station of the China Railway Xi'an Group, the regional railway operator, Ma boarded the X8225 China-Europe freight train (Xi'an), which is more than 50 cars long.

His job was to drive the empty train from Xinfeng to Yan'an, where the cars would be loaded — mainly with coal. He would then drive the train to Xi'an International Port Station and fill the remaining empty cars with imported goods such as auto parts, handmade items, and textiles, bringing the train's weight to 5,000 metric tons.

This round-trip journey covering 616 km requires driving for seven to 12 hours on a single trip.

"Every time I go home, I feel tired, as drivers often have to stay up late. Usually, I spend my day off catching up on sleep to recover," Ma tells China Daily.

Due to this demanding schedule — working on the rails for three days followed by a one-day break — Ma used to believe that dating and marriage would be difficult. Like many fellow train drivers, he also found that loneliness came with the job.

However, you never know when Cupid will decide to shoot his arrow of love.

Interestingly, it was Ma's train — one of the many China-Europe freight trains that have played a pivotal role in boosting trades between China and Eurasia — that provided the young man with an unexpected opportunity to meet his destiny.

Started in 2011, the China-Europe freight train network now reaches 227 cities in 25 European countries and more than 100 cities in 11 Asian nations, according to data from the China State Railway Group.

Wilawan Kunlawong, a Thai student at the School of Public Policy and Administration at



Top: Ma and his Thai wife, Wilawan Kunlawong (second from left), share a family moment with their daughter Guoguo, Wilawan's twin sisters, and his mother. Above: The family having a good time.

Northwestern Polytechnical University, developed an interest in the railway network while preparing her dissertation on trade between China and Thailand in early 2022. One segment of her academic tasks focused on the cargo trains.

Upon realizing that some of her relatives and friends were buying Chinese products like smartphones and electric cars, Wilawan

enhanced her idea to explore the ways Chinese goods are exported, and the railway system underpinning this economic landscape.

On the recommendation of a friend, she contacted Xinfeng Railway Station, where Ma had been working since graduating in 2018 from the Xi'an Railway Vocational and Technical Institute.

Over four years, his dedication and expertise earned him

multiple promotions, from being appointed deputy train driver in 2019, and later advancing to China-Europe freight train driver in 2021. Ma's firsthand experience and deep knowledge of trains made him the candidate to assist Wilawan, their meeting arranged by the station.

Born in Sakon Nakhon in northeastern Thailand in 2000, Wilawan developed a strong interest in learning Chinese when a Confucius Institute introduced a language course at her middle school.

As she dedicated more time to improving her Mandarin, she participated in competitions, achieving one of her highest honors by securing third place in Thailand's Chinese Bridge contest, a competition in which Thai students showcase their language skills.

"One of my teachers is from Xi'an. She told me that the city has a long history and is the burial site of the country's first emperor, Qinshihuang. Since then, I hoped to travel to Xi'an," she says.

Thanks to her competition experiences, Wilawan visited several cities including Chongqing, Beijing, and Guangzhou, Guangdong province, before ultimately

realizing her yearslong dream of starting college in Xi'an, a city that has existed for over 3,000 years and which has been the capital for 13 feudal dynasties.

But Wilawan's meeting with Ma led her to discover that China is more than a country with a rich history and culture; it also has modern and international facets.

"I have found China to be very convenient and comfortable, and people are friendly and welcoming," says Wilawan.

As far as Ma was concerned, Wilawan's tender and caring personality and her fluent Chinese left a deep impression. Their conversation ranged from the goods transported via train to the network's impact on foreign trade and the meeting made Ma feel even prouder of his hometown.

After dinner, Wilawan wanted to treat him to the meal as a token of appreciation for his help, but Ma insisted on paying the bill. As time went by, the two grew closer. One day, Ma reserved a table at a restaurant with a great ambience, carefully prepared flowers and a gift, and confessed his feelings to Wilawan, who happily agreed to be his girlfriend.

In early 2023, Ma proposed, and

"I have found China to be very convenient and comfortable, and people are friendly and welcoming."

Wilawan Kunlawong, postgraduate student, School of Foreign Languages at Northwest University



Online
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they soon got married. Their daughter, Guoguo, was born in February last year, bringing even more joy to their family.

Ma says that he likes to take photos or short videos of the scenery along the route when the train stops at a location. He says that the scenes, especially winter landscapes covered in snow, may be new and exciting for his wife, who had never worn a down jacket before moving to China.

Last September, Wilawan secured admission to pursue a master's degree at the School of Foreign Languages at Northwest University in Xi'an. Her younger twin sisters also decided to study in China and were admitted to Huaqiao University in Xiamen, Fujian province.

"My twin sisters spent Spring Festival with us this year and last year. They saw snow for the first time. We were all very excited and happy. Playing in the snow was so interesting," Wilawan says.

Despite her husband's busy schedule — evidenced by the 30 trips and 24,500 km he drove during the 40-day Spring Festival travel rush — Wilawan says she understands.

"He's not only working hard for the development of the China-Europe freight trains but also striving for the future of our family," she says.

Contact the writer at
xufan@chinadaily.com.cn

When people made better neighbors than fences, foxholes and phones

US poet Robert Frost's 1914 poem *Mending Wall* contains the famous "frosty" line — "Good fences make good neighbors". It's perhaps an encapsulation of rugged New England individualism and



A. Thomas Pasek
Second Thoughts

the fiercely independent spirit of the British settlers who began arriving there on Plymouth Rock on Boxing Day (the day after Christmas), 1620.

The thinking was that after a hard day working in the fields and cranberry bogs, it was reassuring to know that after sunset, a Yankee yeoman could kick back and enjoy their front porch view without pesky, prattling neighbors disturbing their downtime, and that cattle would

more likely stay within their owners' confines — all thanks to the fences.

The poem's 1914 publication date is telling too, as that year marked the moment when World War I erupted in much of the world, with the United States being pulled into the global conflict some three years later. At the outset of hostilities, there was a strong isolationist sentiment in the US, where people were happy to stay behind the safety, security and stability of "fences" and tend to their own gardens, as it were.

However, this go-it-alone zeitgeist is far less observable in traditional Chinese society, and therefore in poetry itself, which when done well, is a timely depiction of any civilization at that glimpse in time.

Of course, as China became a

majority urban population, probably for the first time in 2011, social observers have decried the petering out of purposeful people-to-people interaction and social graces.

Another bellwether year could be said to be 2005, when the first smartphones became nearly ubiquitous overnight, and young and old everywhere went from "see you at Starbucks" to "see you online".

It was no longer socially awkward to purposely avoid eye contact across a carriage, or to sit across from one another on the subway. In fact, it became increasingly cringeworthy for commuters to even initiate eye contact across a carriage. The thinking was: "What are you looking at, stranger? Don't you have a mini-screen to ogle? Gosh, what a creep."

In a sense, our digital devices became Robert Frost's anti-social "fences", giving us the quasi-privacy and personal space that were suddenly foisted upon us by the digital age.

But it wasn't always this way. Chinese poets and sages have long treasured the "tender mercies" of both strangers and acquaintances in a residential setting.

One of the most illustrative is the famous Chinese saying (author unknown): "One million for a house, 10 million for a neighbor (*bai wan mai zhai, qian wan mai lin*)."

The cheeky proverb points to the greater perceived value of friendly, reliable neighbors over owning one's own home — at least in pre-smartphone days — with a societal emphasis on the key role of community and relationships in a good life.

Also, the "million" reference might be a tad dated, given the roller coaster ride that housing prices have undergone in the recent past.

Speaking of the past, especially the distant past, Chinese poet Du Fu wrote *Qiang Village* in the year 757, at a time when a new emperor had taken the throne, and the poet, after being confined inside the city walls of then-capital Chang'an, was finally at liberty to return to his hometown, with love for his family, friends and neighbors buoying his spirit on the road home.

*Red western clouds towering and steep
Down below the sun, footprints on the level fields.
Scrap wood doors and gates,
sparrows chirping
For a returning visitor from hundreds of miles away.*

Wife and children surprised at my appearance

Realizing that I am real, they wipe away their tears.

A chaotic society meets with danger and disarray

Going back now makes life satisfactory and fortuitous.

Neighbors atop the wall fully satisfied

With grateful sighs and tears of joy.

Late evening relief, at midnight my wife and I hold a candle

Facing each other until we sleep and dream.

Luckily, Du's village did not have Wi-Fi that year, so he was able to appreciate the ties that bound neighbors unfettered and unmoled by digital disturbance.

Contact the writer at
andrew@chinadaily.com.cn