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CHINA WATCH

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Tesla's Optimus robot on display at an expo in Weihai, Shandong province, in October. TANG KE / FOR CHINA DAILY

Country opens its doors wider for foreign access

China will continue to relax market access, expand institutional openness and foster a more enabling business climate to better attract and make the most of foreign investment, officials and experts say.

As persistent economic headwinds have dampened the confidence of global investors, China's supersized market, coupled with its robust manufacturing capabilities and extensive supply chain networks, has become a big draw for foreign companies looking to expand their global footprint, they said.

"China will further open up its services sector, with a particular focus on accelerating pilot programs in key areas such as telecommunications, healthcare and education," Li Yongjie, deputy international trade representative of the Ministry of Commerce, said on Jan 15.

China has been revising its list of sectors to encourage foreign investment, Li said, noting that such measures, coupled with the removal of all market access restrictions for foreign investors in manufacturing last year, demonstrate the country's stance toward openness.

The country is committed to aligning itself with high-standard international trade and economic rules and building high-level opening-up platforms such as free trade zones, Li said, adding that it will continue to work to improve the overall business environment.

In the first 11 months of last year more than 52,000 foreign-invested companies were newly established in China, 8.9% more than in the corresponding period of 2023 and the highest level on record for the corresponding period, the ministry said.

Jean-Paul Agon, chairman of the French cosmetics company L'Oreal Group, said: "Success in China makes you stronger worldwide. That is why we firmly believe that the next China is still China and that investing in China is investing in our future."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said this month that in the past five years the return rate on direct investment in China by foreign investors was about 9%, ranking among the highest in the world.

Gao Lingyun, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that amid intensifying global uncertainties, China's unwavering commitment to opening-up, a vast consumer base, a complete industrial system and robust manufacturing capabilities offer unique advantages that are increasingly appealing to foreign investors.

In November China made public revised regulations for foreign investors in its listed

companies, expanding the eligibility criteria and easing financial requirements in an effort to encourage foreign investors to make long-term and valued investments.

"China's efforts to lower foreign investment barriers and improve its business environment have significantly enhanced the country's appeal as a prime destination for global investors," Gao said.

In a survey by the German Chamber of Commerce in China published last month 92% of German companies that responded said they plan to continue their operations in the country. More than half the respondents said they plan to increase their investment over the coming two years.

— WANG KEJU

Global firms aim for greater presence

Multinational corporations say they will deepen their collaboration with their Chinese partners and have reaffirmed their long-term confidence in the world's second-largest economy.

Highlighting China's pivotal position in global industrial and supply chains, top company executives said the country's commitment to advancing high-standard opening-up will contribute to a more favorable business environment, shore up the confidence of foreign investors and drive global economic growth despite mounting external challenges.

Their comments follow the tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference in Beijing last month at which efforts to expand high-standard opening-up and keep foreign trade and investment stable were stressed. The two-day meeting also listed driving the development of new quality productive forces through science and technology innovation as one of the priorities for economic work this year.

Tetsuro Homma, executive vice-president of Panasonic Holdings Corp. of Japan, said the measures Chinese authorities are taking to promote high-standard opening-up and achieve high-quality economic development will help foreign companies increase investment and strengthen their presence in China.

"China is not only a manufacturing giant and a major consumer country but also an innovator with exceptional engineering talent. It boasts a strong ability to absorb new technologies."

Panasonic is drawing many young, high-caliber Chinese talents to its research and development team, he said.

The company's businesses in China mainly involve healthy and intelligent living spaces, new energy vehicle components and intelligent manufacturing.

"We have been expanding our investment in China since the pandemic and have established 18 new facilities," Homma said, adding that

Panasonic's design, R&D, manufacturing, sales and customer services have been localized.

Ian Shih, president of Rockwell Automation China, owned by Rockwell Automation of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is looking forward to helping Chinese companies accelerate digital and intelligent transformation by using innovative technologies, including 5G, artificial intelligence and the industrial internet of things.

Shih said he appreciates China's various measures to boost opening-up, including the deepening of reforms in foreign investment.

"The supportive business environment has bolstered our confidence in our development within China, enabling us to better understand and address the unique needs of our local partners. We believe that cultivating new quality productive forces necessitates upgrading the quality and models of businesses in China."

SEE MARKET, PAGE 3

9%
the return rate on direct investment in China by foreign investors in the past five years

FOR PAMPERED PANDAS, ONLY THE BEST WILL DO

Two giant pandas that arrived from China in mid-October have spent the past three months settling into their newly renovated habitat at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C.

"We were incredibly excited to welcome Bao Li and Qing Bao ... three months ago," said Michael Brown-Palsgrove, curator of giant pandas and the Asia Trail.

"They've adjusted beautifully to their new home and have been busy exploring every nook and cranny of their habitat."

Bao Li, the male, is the grandson of Mei Xiang and Tian Tian, which had been living in the zoo for more than 20 years, and the son of Bao Bao, which was born there. The two new arrivals are both 3 years old.

"Bao Li is very gregarious and interested in what the keepers are doing," Brown-Palsgrove said. "He's always watching them and really wants attention. Qing Bao is a little bit more independent

but definitely still has a strong relationship with the keepers. She recognizes them as a source of joy and gets really excited when they come around. I do think they're ready to meet the public."

The pandas' arrival and residence is a significant milestone in the long-standing collaboration between the zoo and Chinese scientists and veterinarians.

Melissa Songer, a conservation biologist with the Smithsonian, said: "We've had a long history working closely with colleagues in China. Since the late 90s we've been working together to tackle the challenges of panda reproduction, such as figuring out the timing and improving the health of the panda population under human care."

This collaborative spirit has been instrumental in ensuring a smooth transition for Bao Li and Qing Bao. The zoo worked closely with Chinese experts to transform the panda habitat into a panda paradise, complete with fresh landscaping,

a new pool and stimulating climbing structures.

Matthew Sellers, a landscape architect at the zoo, said that he and his team made improvements to all four interior habitats as well as three outdoor yards, including replacing old concrete climbing structures with black locust woods to make it warmer and softer in the bears' living spaces, adding new climbing structures and tree trunks in the yards, modernizing fire alarm and evacuation systems, and improving and upgrading all of the cameras outside and inside.

"We also have plans to start renovating and making improvements to the interpretive elements that are around, so there's always work to be done," Sellers said. "We've worked very hard for the past year, but we'll continue to work on."

Of course, no panda enclosure is complete without a plentiful supply of bamboo. The zoo has that covered too. "We're offering about 100



Qing Bao enjoys a bamboo breakfast at the Smithsonian's National Zoo in Washington on Jan 9. YEAN XU / CHINA DAILY

pounds of bamboo a day for each giant panda," Brown-Palsgrove said.

A dedicated team makes sure the pandas receive a variety of fresh bamboo offerings, ensuring they have plenty of choices when it comes to mealtimes, he said. In addition to bamboo, the pandas also enjoy fruits, vegetables and a specially formulated "panda bread" packed with essential vitamins.

A veterinarian at the zoo, James Steil, said: "The keepers monitor their health daily, and then on a routine basis the veterinary team here will come and visit them and make sure that everything is going well. And then as Bao Li and Qing Bao get used to our routines here, they're also now starting to get into the medical training to be active participants in their medical care."

— YIFAN XU

SOCIETY

Protection of glaciers championed on plateau

Many of Asia's major rivers, including the Yangtze, the Nujiang and the Lancang, originate in Nagchu City, in the north of Xizang autonomous region. The city serves as a core area for building a water protection barrier in Xizang and for water resources in China generally.

With joint work by the government and the public in Nagchu, the country's second-largest prefecture-level area, the city reflects a beautiful picture of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

The Yangtze River's main source is Jangchu Diruk Glacier in the Amdo section of the Three-River-Source National Park. To protect the environment of the river source area a mechanism has been established, and construction work in the Northern Tanggula Mountains area of the park, where the glacier is located, is 90% complete.

Hu Chunyu, deputy head of the Nagchu water conservancy bureau, said measures Nagchu has taken to protect the river include implementing a strict water management system, controlling total water use and ensuring efficiency.

The city has also cracked down on activities that encroach on river and lake areas, including sand mining, garbage dumping and unauthorized construction, and has promoted environmental protection through public education campaigns.

"Through governance, illegal activities that harm water ecology have been effectively curbed, leading to a significant improvement in the water quality of rivers and lakes," Hu said, adding that while the city has made great progress it still faces some difficulties and shortcomings.

"The water quality management system in Nagchu is not yet perfect, soil erosion is severe and effective wetland protection and restoration measures are lacking," Hu said.

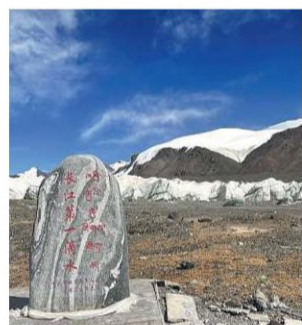
"We have focused on strengthening supervision and law enforcement, establishing a sound water environment monitoring system and intensifying the overall monitoring and evaluation of the water environment."

Glacier resources in Nagchu cover about 2,600 square miles, almost 2% of the administrative area, the Xizang Department of Natural Resources says.

The general volume of water



Xu Qiangqiang, an assistant researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Northwest Institute of Eco-Environment and Resources, measures the size of the Dongkemadi Glacier using a laser radar in Nagchu, Xizang autonomous region, in October. PALDEN NYIMA / CHINA DAILY



From top: Glaciers stem from Bugyai Kangri mountain in Baqen county, Nagchu, Xizang autonomous region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY **Streams stem from the Jangchu Diruk Glacier area in Nagchu.** KUNGA LESANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE **A stele that says "Yangtze River's first drop of water" sits near the Jangchu Diruk Glacier in Nagchu.** PALDEN NYIMA / CHINA DAILY

in the glaciers stands at about 310 billion cubic feet.

Over the past few decades Chinese researchers have been monitoring the changes in the glaciers on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, and they work with the local government to resolve environmental issues such as glacier melting.

Since the Tanggula Mountain Cryosphere and Environment Observation and Research Station of the Xizang Autonomous Region, part of the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Northwest Institute of Eco-Environment and Resources, was set up in 2005, researchers there have been working hard in the icy environment, walking on glaciers and in snowfields at an altitude of over 18,000 feet.

They conduct long-term observations and make recordings of the geological, hydrological, meteorological and permafrost conditions in the source area of the Yangtze.

Xu Qiangqiang, an assistant researcher at the institute, said his team has regularly conducted assessments and health checks of the glaciers in the area using advanced observation and mapping techniques in Nagchu over the past few years.

Nagchu is implementing an integrated protection strategy, adhering to the systematic management of mountains, waters, forests, fields, lakes, grasslands, sands and ice, Xu said.

"The approach of giving priority to natural restoration and combining natural recovery with artificial restoration in the system management has

been very effective."

For important snowcapped glaciers, measures are being taken to curb human disturbances, Xu said.

"In addition, Nagchu is restricting tourism and mountaineering activities in certain glacier areas such as the Ganglung Changmar Glacier. Apart from necessary scientific research and resource surveys, all tourism activities are prohibited, and checkpoints have been set up on roads leading to the glaciers to advise tourists to turn back."

There are about 200,000 glaciers worldwide, with the largest on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, which has about 100,000 glaciers, Xu said.

"The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is known as the water tower of Asia because the melting ice feeds the major rivers in South Asia and Southeast Asia. If these glaciers continue to shrink, the upstream regions will face water shortages."

This would have a significant impact on downstream areas, including water for hydroelectric power stations, residential use and farm irrigation, Xu said.

In a move to protect glaciers in Xizang, the region's legislature adopted a law dedicated to the effort in late July 2024.

The law, which took effect on Oct 1, 2024, provides specific guidelines for governments and relevant departments in glacier areas. It introduced a responsibility system and performance evaluation mechanism for glacier protection goals, and established punitive measures for violations.

— PALDEN NYIMA AND DAQIONG

Sea carbon trading helps cut emissions

A county in Zhejiang province has turned to blue carbon trading to use the power of the market to mitigate carbon emissions and turn a profit.

Zhu Wenrong founded Xiangshan Xuwen Seaweed Development Co. in coastal Xiangshan in 2008. It now accounts for about 75% of all sales of moss in China.

Moss, seaweed and kelp, widely grown in coastal areas of Zhejiang, can effectively absorb carbon dioxide. As part of the company's efforts to help China reach its goals of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality, Zhu and his company teamed up with the local government in 2020 to calculate just how much carbon the local algae companies collectively absorb.

Based on this, a blue carbon auction was held in Xiangshan on Feb 28, 2023, the first of its kind in China. A local manufacturing company won the bid to expand its carbon sink.

A cross-provincial blue ecological carbon account, jointly established by Ningbo Property Exchange Center, Xiamen Property Rights Trading Center and the Xiangshan local government, opened in Xiangshan about 10 months ago. The account mechanism is responsible for the registration, trading, cancellation and application of blue carbon ecological products.

The financial incentives of blue carbon trading have interested the county's algae farmers, Zhu said.

More financial products, such as carbon insurance, can be derived from blue carbon trading, he said, and as a result more environmentally friendly materials are being used in fish farming, another local industry.

In 2021 Huangbi'ao township in Xiangshan piloted the replacement of traditional wooden and foam pontoons used in fish farming with environmentally friendly composite materials such as carbon fiber and polyethylene.

As a result, up to 20% of breeding space has been saved, and the survival rate of fish fry has been lifted by 15%. These simple environmental steps have helped to almost triple profits to 56 yuan (\$7.70) a square foot, a local official said.

— SHI JING



Xiangshan's Huangbi'ao township uses environmentally friendly composite materials for fishing pontoons. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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The expressway dragon that sets a green example

A 100-mile stretch of road from Jinan to Weifang in Shandong province has become China's first zero-carbon expressway.

From the air the expressway conjures up the image of a winding dragon whose scales are made of photovoltaic panels. This project, which was completed in September 2023, has used the road's verges, service areas, toll stations and building rooftops to form an integrated solar power generation installation.

The panels on the verges on both sides of the expressway stabilize the soil and generate electricity. In addition, the panels installed on isolated spots along the road use land that would otherwise be idle, providing stable power supply for the expressway, said Xie Guomu, director of the Jinan-Weifang expressway project office of Shandong Hi-Speed Group.

"Achieving zero carbon emissions involves long-term and comprehensive planning. Through emissions reductions measures total carbon emissions during the expressway's operational period are equal to or less than the total carbon reductions, achieving zero emissions."

The photovoltaic facilities



Photovoltaic panels installed along the Jinan-Weifang expressway in Shandong province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

and smart systems have significantly contributed to the expressway's carbon reduction efforts.

The photovoltaic power installations along the expressway have a capacity of 68 megawatts. Over a 25-year operational period the total electricity generated is forecast to reach about 1.7 billion kilowatt-hours, with total carbon reduction of about 1.68 million short tons, Xie said.

The photovoltaic panels installed above the tunnel entrances provide electricity directly to the tunnel's electromechanical equipment. Among the equipment used in the tunnels is an adaptive lighting system that automatically adjusts brightness based

on external light conditions and vehicle speed. This system ensures safe driving while reducing energy consumption.

Lu Youfu, business manager of the energy and environment department of Shandong Hi-Speed Group, said, "The company has also launched a smart road network management system and promoted the use of electronic toll collection, which has greatly improved traffic efficiency and is expected to reduce vehicle carbon emissions by 154,000 short tons a year."

The expressway also uses a radar and video roadside sensing system to detect traffic events, with a key event detection accuracy rate in excess of 97%. By using

comprehensive monitoring, reliable emergency response and real-time forecasting and warning technologies, the expressway ensures precise vehicle dispatching and guidance, improving driving safety and traffic flow.

Service areas are another important area in which carbon emissions can be cut because of their relatively concentrated nature, Lu said.

At one service area, covering 49 acres, photovoltaic panels have been installed on roofs and carports, creating a photovoltaic power station with total installed capacity of 3.2 megawatts, complemented by energy storage equipment.

The photovoltaic system at the service area generates more than 10,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity a day, equivalent to saving 1,300 short tons of standard coal annually.

By the end of 2023, 17 provinces had started building zero-carbon service areas along their expressways.

Shandong Hi-Speed Group says it aims to build at least three additional zero-carbon expressways and at least seven zero-carbon service areas by the end of this year.

— ZHAO RUIXUE

BUSINESS



From left: A foreign visitor plays a lusheng (reed pipe) with villagers of the Miao ethnic group in Congjiang county, Guizhou province, on Dec 20. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY BY LI RUICHANG / FOR CHINA DAILY. Tourists take photos at Terracotta Warrior Pit 1 of the Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, on Dec 30. ZHANG TIANZHU / FOR CHINA DAILY



Tourism new year off to a flying start

Takemoto Akitoshi decided to act on his new year wish after he learned China had waived visa applications for Japanese travelers in late November.

"I've long looked forward to visiting China, especially now that I have time on my hands after retirement," said Akitoshi of Tokyo, in his 70s.

He had planned to apply for a visa and was thrilled to be spared the trouble.

"It was a smooth arrival," said Akitoshi, who traveled with his wife to the country for the first time, and celebrated the arrival of the new year in Beijing.

He was particularly impressed by the hutong alleys, the Central Axis, the Palace Museum and the Great Wall, he said.

"The city has so many world cultural heritage sites, and you can get a good taste of the profound history."

The couple, with 20 other Japanese travelers, were among the first overseas tourists to visit China without visas this year.

Policies to make inbound travel easier have resulted in a significant increase in the number of international visitors.

Last year more than 20.1 million visa-free trips to China were made by international travelers, more than double the figure in 2023, said Lyu Ning, a spokeswoman for the National Immigration Administration.

The authorities reported a total of 610 million inbound and outbound trips last year, 44% more than in 2023, Lyu said, adding that of these trips 64.9 million were made by foreign nationals, 83% more than in the previous year.



Travelers dressed in Chinese traditional costumes at the Forbidden City in Beijing on Jan 10. WANG XIN / FOR CHINA DAILY

In December 2023 China adopted a visa-free policy for passport holders from France, Germany, Italy, Malaysia, the Netherlands and Spain.

Since then more countries have been included, and ordinary passport holders from 38 countries can now enter China without a visa for business, tourism, to visit relatives and friends and on exchange visits, and they have a transit period of no more than 30 days.

In mid-December further relaxations of the visa-free transit policy were announced, with both the foreign travelers' period of stay and the list of accessible ports and provincial-level regions being extended.

Eligible travelers transiting to a third country or region are permitted to stay in the

country for up to 10 days, the National Immigration Administration said.

On Jan 1 more than 300 South Korean tourists arrived on a cruise ship in Yantai, Shandong province, for a three-day trip.

Electronic self-service entry cards have been developed for foreigners, biometric data collection equipment has been set up in advance, and information collection and inspection has been improved to make customs clearance easier, said Sun Feixiang, an official with Yantai border inspection station.

Also on Jan 1, 26 tourists from Thailand arrived in Wuzhen water town in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province. Signs at the town's major scenic areas are in both Chinese and English. Tour guides who

speak English, Thai and Japanese are also available to help inbound travelers.

Fu Yifu, of an institute that is part of the financial services provider Star Atlas Finance in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, said these all point to the success of the measures to facilitate international exchanges. Convenience brought by related policies will encourage international tourists to visit China and help the tourism industry to grow.

In addition to the visa and transit policies, government organs such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Commerce have worked together in recent years to improve the convenience of travel, payment and accommodation for foreign

nationals in China. This has driven the growth of industries such as tourism, transportation and catering.

Wang Wei, senior vice-president of the online travel agency Trip.com Group, said the inbound tourism market was about to enter a stage of high-quality growth. Government support for policies related to inbound tourism has brought new opportunities for the market, he said.

"For example, the new visa-exemption policy for foreigners in transit not only extends the stay of international tourists but also addresses the issue of cross-regional movement."

"In the past those tourists might only stay at the airport when transiting through China, but the new visa-exemption policy will further draw on China's rich tourism resources, and there will be great market opportunities."

Trip.com said the number of inbound travel orders it has received for the Spring Festival holiday, from Jan 28 to Feb 4, has more than tripled compared with the corresponding period last year.

At Trip.com Group's Global Partner Summit in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on Dec 18, the company's co-founder and chairman Liang Jianzhang issued a survey showing that safety, cleanliness, a long history, friendly people and delicious food were among the aspects of China that foreign tourists most frequently mentioned.

"The potential for the development of inbound tourism is enormous, and the various pain points are being gradually addressed," Liang said.

— YANG FEIYUE

Supplier to the world takes new approach

From a mindset of selling globally to buying globally, Yiwu, Zhejiang province, is set to launch a new round of international trade reforms, officials and business people say.

Yiwu, a globally renowned hub for small commodities and a key supplier for Chinese cross-border e-commerce platforms, has trade relationships with 233 countries and regions, attracting nearly 600,000 foreign visitors a year.

As early as 2011 Yiwu began drawing up a plan on promoting exports, and a new plan for deepening international trade reforms in the city has been approved recently.

Li Jun, deputy director of the Zhejiang Provincial Development and Reform Commission, said: "The previous reforms emphasized exports, addressing the issue of selling to the world. Now priority will be given to imports, focusing on buying globally while continuing to deepen selling globally."

"To provide convenience for foreign traders in terms of entry, residence, healthcare and payments, we have integrated reforms across many departments, including public security, technology, human resources and commerce."

Zhejiang China Commodity



A foreign merchant inspects sporting goods in Yiwu, Zhejiang province, in January. SHI BUFA / FOR CHINA DAILY

City Group Co. has been selected as the sole pilot company in a preliminary effort to promote imports. On Dec 25 the first import transaction of items listed on the positive list, such as toys, was completed, a breakthrough in accelerating import trade development. The launch ceremony for Yiwu's innovative import trade pilot project and the first transaction under the positive list was held at Yiwu China Imported Commodities Market.

At the ceremony a new exhibition hall for the pilot project's goods opened, said Chen Xiang, general manager of Yiwu China Commodity City Import and Export Co.

"The entire hall is organized based on the 28 major categories in the positive list, featuring more than 160 stock keeping units from the initial trial phase."

Li said: "We are now considering using Commodity City as a pilot unit to advance digital regulatory platforms and test positive list imports. Once conditions are mature, more goods will be included on the list."

The new pilot's exhibition hall allows both wholesale and retail.

According to pilot regulations, Commodity City is the sole import entity, Chen said.

"All imported goods must go through the company for Customs declarations and clearance. Once cleared, the goods are distributed at our Imported Commodities Market, where they are sold wholesale and then further distributed by our wholesalers."

Yiwu has worked hard to promote high-level opening-up in recent years, the Yiwu Bureau of Commerce said. While maintaining high-quality export growth, it has accelerated the development of import platforms such as Yiwu Comprehensive Bonded Zone and Yiwu-Xinjiang-Europe freight trains.

Relying on its market advantages, Yiwu has expanded imports to meet growing domestic demand for high-quality foreign products. The city's imports from January to November 2024 were valued at nearly 72 billion yuan (\$9.8 billion), 19% more than in the corresponding period in 2023 and accounting for 77.5% of Zhejiang's import growth.

— CHEN YE

Market: Investment structure optimized

From page 1

Zhou Mi, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in Beijing, said China has not only lowered the threshold for foreign investment but also introduced incentives for key industries as well as R&D and innovation to guide and support foreign capital to flow into high-tech manufacturing.

The increase in foreign investment in China's high-tech industry will yield positive returns for both sides, Zhou said. The structure of foreign investment in China continues to improve. In the first 11 months of last year the proportion of foreign direct investment in actual use in China's high-tech manufacturing rose 0.3 percentage point compared with the corresponding period in 2023, the Ministry of Commerce said.

Denis Depoux, global managing director of the management consultancy Roland Berger, said: "Foreign enterprises have been, and will hopefully

remain, a key contributor to the Chinese industrial modernization drive. And now China is committed to further opening up the services sector. Along with this transformation there are plenty of opportunities for international collaboration, investment and joint development."

Zhu Keli, founding director of the China Institute of New Economy in Beijing, said the country's intensified efforts

to further reform institutions and mechanisms to promote foreign investment have demonstrated its determination to foster a world-class, market-oriented business environment governed by a sound legal framework.

Anu Rathinde, president of the smart building solutions provider Johnson Controls Asia-Pacific, said the rise of new quality productive forces "signifies a transformative shift in China's economic model, replacing outdated growth drivers with more dynamic ones, and establishing the foundation for more robust economic development".

— FAN FEIFEI

"There are plenty of opportunities for international collaboration, investment and joint development."

DENIS DEPOUX

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Celebration for a time of promise

Amid the crackle of firecrackers, the old year takes flight. The spring breeze brings warmth and Tusu wine brings delight. On countless households, the morning sun gleams. As fresh peachwood charms take the old ones' place.
— Wang Anshi (1021-86)

The poet and statesman Wang of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), composed this poem in 1069 to celebrate the arrival of a new year.

The poem endures as a timeless expression of hope, learned by heart and recited by generations of Chinese during new year celebrations, including the coming one, on Jan 29.

That hope is rooted in a seasonal promise. The traditional Chinese calendar aligns the new year with the end of winter and the beginning of spring, hence the name Spring Festival.

At the core of the calendar, which integrates both lunar and solar timekeeping cycles, is an effort to harmonize agricultural and social practices with the rhythm of nature. The new year marks the beginning of the farming season, as hope stirs beneath the thawing earth.

The calendar has evolved over thousands of years, as have Chinese New Year traditions. While the new year begins at the stroke of midnight, the festive celebrations typically extend for weeks, and in certain areas over a month.

As Wang rightly noted, the old year would only depart with the ear-splitting sound of firecrackers, tiny thunderclaps that rattle street-level windows, send children cupping their ears in delight and leave on the ground the detritus of shredded red paper that once wrapped the fiery explosives.

While the firecrackers create a chaotic symphony full of energy, it is not to delight the ears, but, according to legend, to drive away a ferocious beast.

This beast, named *Nian*, the character for year, once struck terror in villages, until a wise old man discovered that despite its apparent invincibility, *Nian* feared three things: loud noise, bright lights and the color red.

Thus, firecrackers explode at night, candles flicker until dawn and lanterns sway from every rooftop. The color red appears everywhere, from scarlet couplets and paper cut window decorations to red envelopes filled with money, gifted to the young as a token of good fortune.

An indispensable part of Spring Festival is *tuán yuán fàn*, or the reunion feast, shared by all family members



Clockwise from top: Intricate paper cuts adorn most homes to ring in the new year. Making dumplings together is a significant part of family reunions. A family adorn their home with red couplets in Wuzhou, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. An artisan creates snake-themed paper cut in Shijiazhuang, Hebei province.

on Chinese New Year's Eve.

In many parts of northern China this celebration includes eating dumplings — round, palm-sized dough wrappers filled with minced ingredients and shaped like ingots, symbolizing wealth. Occasionally a coin is hidden inside one of the dumplings, promising extra luck to the fortunate diner who discovers it.

Yet it is the making of dumplings that truly brings the family together.

Scattered across the vast country, many family members may not have seen one another for an entire year. As they gather around the table to knead, roll and fold the dough, conversations flow, banter crackles, and laughter fills the room. Personal stories — of both triumphs and travails — are shared, and fond memories of the past resurface, even as dumplings take shape in hands.

The first days of the new year are spent visiting family, friends and associates, each gathering contributing to the vibrant tapestry of relationships that lies at the core of Chinese existence.

The ancient custom of making pickled garlic called *la ba suan* dictates that the intense preparations for the new year begin on the eighth day of the 12th month. This marks the start of the final rush to ready the household for the celebration, including housecleaning, stockpiling food and making new clothes.

"To sense the year's end approaching; is like seeing a snake slipping into a ravine. Half its scaled body has already gone away; who can stop its journey or make it stay?"

SU SHI (1037-1101)

drink next, acknowledging a year slipping quietly away.

The memories of Spring Festival are distinct to each generation, with every generation taking part in its own unique activities, often quite different from those of the ones that came before or will come after.

In times of material scarcity Spring Festival was a rare opportunity for a true feast, which children eagerly awaited for weeks, even months.

The meal was typically prepared by the family, and the hustle and bustle of the kitchen — the clatter of pots and pans, the aroma of food — enhanced the festive atmosphere.

For children the very thought of a lavish banquet, a table laden with dishes, was enough to send their mouths watering and their imaginations racing, all amid the joyful chaos of a large family gathering.

The scarcity began to ease in the 1980s, following China's reform and opening-up initiated at the end of 1978. These sweeping changes, which significantly boosted economic growth, also gave rise to a vast population of migrant workers. By the mid-1990s their numbers had surged to hundreds of millions.

The labor migration from rural areas to industrial cities not only drove the country's economic boom but also profoundly altered rural life and social structures, reshaping traditions such as Spring Festival in lasting ways.

For migrant workers and the families they have left behind — parents, spouses and children — Spring Festival is no longer a pause in agricultural labor but a much-cherished time for reunions, a brief chance to close the distance imposed by economic necessity.

Before the advent of high-speed railways, the massive flow of people in the days leading up to Spring Festival turned train rides into a grueling ordeal.

As if the journey itself were not challenging enough, nearly everyone carried giant packages, gifts for loved ones, in an era when what was available in one part of the country might be impossible to find in another.

These experiences are now but the fare of memories. Today children no longer eagerly anticipate the festival for a taste of candy, and Spring Festival may even be spent on a sun-kissed beach, far from home.

Yet the relentless tide of urbanization and the fast pace of modern life means that separation has become more frequent and inevitable, making each reunion all the more precious.

It has long been a tradition for people, except young children, to stay awake throughout the night beginning from Chinese New Year's Eve. This custom, known as *shou sui*, reflects a deep desire to safeguard what is most valued. The glow of lights is also expected to illuminate the path home for loved ones.

Su Shi (1037-1101), a renowned polymath of the Northern Song Dynasty and a contemporary of Wang Anshi, composed a poem for the occasion, under the title *Shou Sui*.

"To sense the year's end approaching; is like seeing a snake slipping into a ravine. Half its scaled body has already gone away; who can stop its journey, or make it stay?"

According to the Chinese zodiac, this coming New Year marks the Year of the Snake, often referred to in Chinese culture as the "dragon minor". This connection stems from the snake's physical resemblance to the dragon, as well as its grace, mystery and power, qualities that mirror those of the dragon, in Chinese culture a symbol of might and virtue.

The festival usually concludes on the 15th day of Chinese New Year, this year corresponding to Feb 12 on the solar calendar. This final day, marking the first full moon of the new year, is traditionally illuminated by delicately handcrafted lanterns, some bearing riddles, that are ubiquitous.

On Dec 4, UNESCO inscribed Spring Festival — the social practices of the Chinese people in celebration of their traditional new year — on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The decision was made in recognition of the festival's colorful mosaic of social practices, rituals and cultural elements that engage the entire Chinese society.

— ZHAOXU



From left: Villagers enjoy the reunion feast during Spring Festival in Shunde, Guangdong province. Railway stations bustle with passengers during the holiday. Customers in Donglijia village, Shandong province, select red couplets.

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