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CHINA DAILY

GLOBAL EDITION 中国日报 MONDAY, JANUARY 30, 2023

Public outrage



Protesters gather in Atlanta, Georgia, on Saturday at a rally to protest the fatal police beating of Tyre Nichols in Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis authorities released graphic videos on Friday that showed police officers beating Nichols, a 29-year-old black man. Five Memphis police officers, all of whom are black, were charged with second-degree murder after Nichols died in a hospital on Jan 10, three days after he had been stopped on suspicion of reckless driving. CHENEY ORR / AFP **Editorial, page 11**

Managing ties high on agenda for China, US

By **ZHANG YUNBI**
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On Jan 21, Chinese New Year's eve, Foreign Minister Qin Gang appeared on big screens during the NBA game in Washington, DC, between the Washington Wizards and the Orlando Magic to deliver a message.

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The Washington Wizards, formerly known as the Washington Bullets, visited China shortly after the Sino-US diplomatic relationship was established in 1979, and was the first NBA team to visit the country.

In his video message, Qin said that in December, as the then Chinese ambassador to the United States, he "spent a wonderful evening watching a fabulous game" played by the team. "I wish the Chinese and the American people a prosperous Year of the Rabbit and a bright future," he said.

Steve Orlins, president of the National Committee on US-China Relations, told Forbes magazine that Qin using an NBA game to extend his Chinese New Year greetings to the people of the US "is an imaginative way to remind Americans that we share many things with China, including love of the NBA".

Seeking more common ground between China and the US, managing differences, rejecting economic decoupling and avoiding clashes in the Western Pacific region are among the top tasks of the two countries' diplomats in the new year, officials and leading policy researchers said.

Following President Xi Jinping's face-to-face meeting with US President Joe Biden in November, Vice-Premier Liu He met with US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in Zurich, Switzerland, before Chinese New Year, and Beijing called the talks "constructive".

According to the General Administration of Customs, in the first 11 months of 2022, China-US trade volume reached 4.62 trillion yuan ($681 billion), up 4.8 percent year-on-year.

Washington has publicly voiced hope on the plan for US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to visit China in the near future.

The two countries are in communication on the specifics of the visit, and Beijing hopes that "the US will perceive China correctly, pursue dialogue and win-win cooperation, not confrontation and zero-sum competition, and work with China in the same direction", Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said on Jan 17.

Wu Xinbo, dean of Fudan University's Institute of International Studies, said the US should not continue practicing coercion against China while seeking dialogue with Beijing. "The Biden administration sought to define the rules and the conditions of its competition with China, but China refused to follow the US lead or fall into the US trap, leading to Washington's frustration," he said.

Wu added that the Biden administration has formulated a clear road map of its two-sided economic and trade policy toward China: It seeks decoupling in some areas while continuing to utilize the Chinese market in other domains.

Huang Ping, China's consul general in New York, proposed "three R's" — respect, recovery and responsibility — as his wishes at a Chinese New Year reception with business leaders this month.

"China and the US, in the spirit of mutual respect, should see each other as partners and opportunities", achieve new heights in their cooperation, shoulder their responsibilities to shore up multilateralism and an open economy while addressing global challenges, Huang said.

See ***Ties,*** *page 3*

Provinces unveil policies to spur growth in 2023

Experts: Economy will rebound with incentive measures of govts, optimized COVID response

By **OUYANG SHIJIA** in Beijing and **WANG YING** in Shanghai

8
provincial-level regions in China
saw their total GDP exceed 5 trillion yuan ($737 billion) in 2022.

Several provincial-level governments have announced incentive measures, including fostering high-quality development and optimizing the business environment, to encourage growth this year and spur recovery from the impact of COVID-19.

Experts said the actions show many governments are taking a more pro-growth stance, which will give a strong boost to the economy in 2023.

They said the impact of the virus will be short-lived, and the economy will rebound with the orderly implementation of the optimized COVID containment measures as well as stimulus policies and follow-up measures taking effect.

Inside
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Guangdong province will step up efforts to meet the annual target of GDP growth above 5 percent, including speeding up the implementation of projects mapped out by the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) and boosting private sector investment. Ai Xuefeng, director of the provincial development and reform commission, made the statement at a conference on high-quality development on Saturday, the first working day after the Spring Festival holiday.

An action plan consisting of 10 points was released by the Shanghai municipal government on Sunday. According to the plan, three tasks — boosting confidence, expanding demand and seeking stable growth — are imperative, with the city aiming to achieve a GDP growth of over 5.5 percent in 2023.

The plan focuses on stabilizing expectations, shoring up confidence, aiding enterprises in phases and pushing forward high-quality development. Bailing out enterprises, restoring consumption, extending investment, stabilizing foreign trade, elevating industrial innovation and creating a world-class business environment are among 10 measures included in the action plan.

Officials from Zhejiang and Jilin provinces also held meetings on Saturday and pledged to make efforts to boost the digital economy and optimize the business environment.

Li Chao, chief economist at Zheshang Securities, said most provincial-level regions are targeting GDP growth of above 5 percent in 2023, voicing optimism for a notable economic rebound this year.

Li said that local governments are giving priority to expanding investment and spurring consumption.

Many provincial-level regions, such as Shandong and Henan, have announced measures to speed up the construction of key projects in 2023, especially in fields such as new energy, new materials, new technology, water resource management and transportation, which will inject impetus into the economy, Li said.

Despite the headwinds and challenges, China posted better-than-expected 3 percent economic growth in 2022, with many regions reporting solid GDP growth last year.

At least eight provincial-level regions in China saw their total GDP exceed 5 trillion yuan ($737 billion) in 2022, with Guangdong and Jiangsu reaching over 12 trillion yuan, according to provincial government data.

Zhou Maohua, an analyst at China Everbright Bank, said China's economy is expected to expand by more than 5 percent this year, given the gradual return to normal work and production levels and stronger policy support.

However, Zhou also warned of difficulties and challenges ahead, such as high inflation across the globe and slowing international demand.

He said the government needs to boost domestic demand, strengthen coordination of fiscal and monetary policies and ease economic burdens on hard-hit enterprises and sectors.

A State Council executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang on Saturday said the country will consolidate and expand its economic rebound, accelerate consumption recovery and stabilize foreign trade and investment.

Zhang Yue contributed to this story.

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PASTRY CHEFS MASTER THE ART OF INNOVATION

Inspirational kitchen creations push the boundaries of tradition



By **LI YINGXUE**
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in-depth

With a fluffy mane, large gleaming eyes and two layers of eyelashes, a palm-sized piece of puff pastry shaped like a lion's head has attracted millions of "likes" on the Douyin short-video platform.

Tens of thousands of netizens have been toiling in kitchens in attempts to replicate the item.



Chef Wu Yang's creative pastries

Wu Yang, 35, a pastry chef from Shenyang, capital of Liaoning province, who created the piece and has observed numerous failed efforts to reproduce it, is sharing detailed steps with his followers on how to make such an item. He gives instructions on perfecting the dough and performing specific cuts to the pastry.

Wu has devoted himself to traditional Chinese puff pastry and dough sculptures for more than a decade. With his skillful hands and boundless imagination, he has created a wide range of pastry items.

He gained inspiration for creating the lion's head from the traditional Chinese folk art of lion dancing while watching the *Wong Fei-hung* film series, which began in 1991, and was centered on a martial artist who lived in Guangdong province.

"Traditional Chinese culture is my inspiration for making Chinese puff pastry. In the future, I hope more young people will understand the culture behind this form of pastry," Wu said.

See ***Chefs,*** *page 2*

Nation's health campaigns set example amid pandemic

WORLD WATCH
By Muhammad Asif Noor

On the occasion in December of the 70th anniversary of the establishing of the Patriotic Health Campaign, President Xi Jinping called for launching more targeted patriotic health campaigns to build a healthy China.

These campaigns have remained the hallmark of China's health system for the past 70 years and have revolutionized China's entire health system, which is now a model for the world.

The health campaigns, based on the latest scientific knowledge, aim to implement disease prevention measures through various initiatives and behaviors. Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, emphasized the need to launch these critical health initiatives in a more targeted way, as the world faces another growing threat from COVID-19 mutations that are creating new challenges and require an innovative response.

The president also said that this will fortify a community line of defense for pandemic prevention and control, hence saving lives.

As a result of such robust health mechanisms built by the CPC in China, the world's second-largest economy has defeated several COVID-19 outbreaks. Over the years, through patriotic health campaigns, the CPC has focused on people's health, offered priority to prevention, effectively responded to infectious diseases and made substantial improvements in social health management.

The CPC initiated the Patriotic Health Campaign in the 1950s to promote a healthy lifestyle and behavior among citizens to improve community health. Following the "big health" concept, these campaigns have focused on addressing problems at their source and have achieved significant progress over the past 70 years.

See ***Health,*** *page 3*



Employees work on production lines at a business that makes energy-saving materials in Zibo, Shandong province, on Saturday, the first work day after the Spring Festival holiday. ZHAO DONGSHAN / XINHUA

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PAGE TWO

From page 1

While using traditional cooking methods and authentic flavors, Chinese pastry chefs of all ages are becoming innovative in developing new combinations of traditional Chinese culture and the modern world to attract young people.

Chinese puff pastry typically requires making a simple modeling dessert. In creating the lion's head, Wu turned the pastry into a three-dimensional sculpture.

He made each small part of the head separately with water dough, before sticking the parts together with egg white. For the mane, he made 160 cuts to the dough to produce the fluffy effect after deep frying.

"It took several attempts to finally create the lion's head. At first, the two layers of eyelashes were the same size, but I later made the second layer smaller and thinner to make it stand out," Wu said.

The lion's head creation is the result of Wu's accumulated pastry-making skills over the past 10 years.

He used to be responsible for making congee at a restaurant, for which he was required to cut ginger and carrots precisely — an experience that helped him master a range of knife skills.

A decade ago, he developed a passion for dough sculptures. This work requires many skills, such as kneading, rolling, cutting, carving, and shaping with a small bamboo knife, all of which take long hours of practice. Wu studied these skills by self-learning.

Lacking a basic training in art, he initially found it difficult to accurately gauge a dough sculpture's proportions and features.

His solution was to observe people, and he still frequently looks hard at those around him, observing their body proportions. Over time, the pastry items Wu makes have become increasingly lifelike and evocative.

Ten years ago, he opened a studio to teach the art of making puff pastry. In addition to teaching, he found time to create new products. "Like a singer releasing a new song each year, I plan to launch a new puff pastry product each year," he said.

After creating abalone and flower puff pastry, he came up with the lion's head in 2021, which quickly became a hit on social media.

Pastry lovers nationwide have learned to make such pieces from Wu, who has taught more than 1,000 students. He likes to share his techniques and thoughts about puff pastry, and is happy to see students presenting his creations in competitions and at gala dinners.

"I used to focus on the techniques, but now I think more about ways to combine traditional Chinese culture with puff pastry," Wu said, adding that it is good to see more young people becoming interested in Chinese pastry.







From left: Pastry in the shape of lotus roots created by master chef Wang Zhiqiang; pastry resembling a pineapple made by Chen Xiaodong; pastry shaped like plum blossom created by Wu Yang. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Chefs: Students learn from the masters

Young inheritor

One of Wu's students, Chen Xiaodong, 23, from Shunde, Guangdong province, grew up in a lion dancing culture.

Chen, who has studied Chinese pastry since 2018, wants to make an item such as the lion's head, but he doesn't know how to master this art. "It's difficult. If you make a tiny mistake in any of the steps, you will fail," he said.

"I learned from social media that Wu Yang had made puff pastry shaped like a lion's head, and I was thrilled to be one of those attempting to create new pastry works that combine Chinese culture."

Chen contacted Wu to learn the secrets of making such a piece. "Even though we've never met, when we discuss the skills of making puff pastry, we talk for ages," Chen said.

To perfect his lion's head, Chen visited a local lion dance inheritor to learn about this culture. According to Chen, his own version of the lion looks rather fierce, while Wu's rendering is cute.



"Just like myself four years ago, my students are looking forward to becoming pastry chefs."

Chen Xiaodong, 23, pastry chef and teacher from Shunde, Guangdong province



"I want young people to try around 20 snacks without feeling full, and also to learn about the stories behind each snack."

Wang Zhiqiang, 74, master chef known as the "king of pastry"



I used to focus on the techniques, but now I think more about ways to combine traditional Chinese culture with puff pastry."

Wu Yang, 35, chef devoted to traditional puff pastry and dough sculptures

"Wu and I are thinking about making a lion that opens its mouth wider. The angle at which the lion's head is placed into the oil needs adjusting to give it the shape we want after it is deep fried," Chen said.

After studying Chinese pastry at Shunde Polytechnic in Foshan, Guangdong, from 2018 to 2020, Chen continued to learn this traditional skill at the Shunde campus of Hanshan Normal University. He graduated from the university last year.

To pay his tuition fees, he did three part-time jobs each day — selling steamed buns and porridge in the morning, egg puffs in the afternoon, and barbecue food at night.

At university, Chen improved his cooking skills and took part in numerous cookery competitions. "I want to present my pastry works and ideas," he said.

Although still young, he has already taught the art of making Chinese pastry.

"Just like myself four years ago, my students are looking forward to becoming pastry chefs," he said.

Lifetime's passion

Dubbed the "king of pastry", Wang Zhiqiang, 74, became a pastry chef assigned to Chinese state banquets when he was in his 20s. Now, he is constantly creating new products.

In 1971, Wang was tasked with making pastry for a state banquet marking an international table tennis competition. Designing a cake in the shape of a table tennis paddle, he used a Chinese yam to make the ball.

A year later, during then-US president Richard Nixon's visit to China, Wang designed a dish for a state banquet that resembled a panda playing with bamboo.

Over the next two decades, he created and perfected *mianguo*, or flour-based fruits, with his apprentices. He also spent 10 years finding the ideal solution to creating the colors he insists on using as natural ingredients.

"We lost count of how many times we tried to simulate the colors. Sometimes we'd find a good color, but when we steamed it, the color faded," Wang said.

When cooking *mianguo*, he chooses to steam, instead of deep-frying or baking the pastries, as steaming is a traditional Chinese cooking method and a healthier alternative.

After five decades, Wang continues to push the boundaries in making traditional Chinese pastry.

"You have to rack your brain to create, and sometimes when you think of good ideas, you have to get up in the middle of the night and draw them directly in a notebook," he said.

Wang and his apprentices recently created dried nuts by filling a red, wooden Sudoku board with nine different types of nut, including peanuts, hazelnuts and pistachios, which had one thing in common in addition to their tempting appearance — they are all made with flour.

For the dried nuts, Wang used puff pastry to create the outer casing, and placed the nuts inside.

He believes that pastry innovation should reflect the times, the development of society, seasonal changes, and diversity of ingredients.

He emphasizes the three points that must be followed for innovative work: items should be handmade; the work has to be unique; and it should be performed with precision and care.

"In China, pastry is used to celebrate traditional festivals, including dumplings for Spring Festival, mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival, and *zongzi* sticky rice dumplings for the Dragon Boat Festival," Wang said.

He thinks the first skill that aspiring Chinese pastry chefs need to master is learning to make five wrappers — for dumplings, steamed stuffed buns, *shaomai* dumplings, wontons and spring rolls. "The *shaomai* wrap should have pleats like a ballet skirt," he said.

According to Wang, in addition to wrappers, potential pastry chefs must be able to make different types of dough, as well as sweet and savory fillings.

"I'm not against mechanized production, but we must inherit craftsmanship, and also be innovative to attract young customers. Decades ago, people ate pastry to fill their stomachs, but nowadays young customers want to try something delicate," Wang said.

He is planning to make small, cute versions of traditional Beijing snacks such as sweet pea cake and red bean cake, which can be put together by using a method similar to creating a mortise-and-tenon joint in woodwork. Wang also wants to make sesame deep-fried noodles in a small butterfly shape, and traditional flour tea.

"I want young people to try around 20 snacks without feeling full, and also to learn about the stories behind each snack," he said.

Brands turn to traditional Chinese culture to attract young customers

By LI YINGXUE

To celebrate the Year of the Rabbit, time-honored Beijing snack brand Daoxiangcun launched gift boxes featuring festive snacks and traditional Chinese packaging.

One of the gift boxes that has been particularly popular among young customers due to its cute appearance and trendy contents, features rabbit cake with soybean cheese carrot fillings, among other items.

Shi Yan, deputy general manager of Beijing Daoxiangcun, said that in addition to the brand's 200 or so regular snacks, it is creating new products to tempt the taste buds of younger shoppers, in addition to launching seasonal products such as autumn red-leaf cake.

"For those snacks that have been lost over the years, we are trying to replicate them by checking old recipe books and materials, as well as asking folklore experts about them," she said. "The current China-chic trend is not just about a cool appearance, it has to resonate with traditional Chinese culture."

Chinese pastry brands are looking to this trend to attract young customers through inheriting traditional Chinese culture, creating stylish products, and collaborating with other domestic brands.

In August 2021, Daoxiangcun launched Location Zero, a renovated store in the Chinese capital's Dongcheng district, where a variety of authentic Beijing pastries with new twists are available.

"Unlike our regular stores that are solely for selling products, in this branch, we focus on the customer experience," Shi said.



Location Zero, a renovated store in Beijing's Dongcheng district opened by time-honored snack brand Daoxiangcun, offers traditional pastries with new twists. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY





Pastry with rose petal fillings (left) and persimmon fillings (right) from Daoxiangcun. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"We have an open kitchen in the branch, where customers can not only watch pastry products being made, but also have lessons to make the pastry themselves.

"Typically, 80 percent of the customers at our regular stores are older than 45, but at the Location Zero store, 95 percent of the customers are young people."

Shi added that many internet celebrities visit this branch to take photos and post on social media platforms.

Location Zero has launched several beverage products based on Daoxiangcun's signature snacks such as ox tongue cake and jujube paste. The design for jujube paste cake is also used for accessories such as earrings and rings, which have proved popular.

Daoxiangcun recently opened its Chaoyang Time branch at a location that housed the brand's factory from 1992 to 2005.

"We have more than 200 stores in Beijing, and we will continue to explore the specialty of each branch and bring more experiences to customers," Shi said.

According to a report on the pastry industry in China issued in December by the Timon Research Institute, which focuses on the food industry, although Chinese pastry accounts for a small proportion of the overall market, the prospects are promising. For instance, the size of the Chinese pastry market grew to 248.2 billion yuan ($36.7 billion) in 2019, up from 220.3 billion yuan in 2013.

The report said that driven by China-chic, many new Chinese bakeries, such as Dim Sum Bureau of Momo and Tiger Attitude Chartered Pastry Bank, have entered the market in the past two years by focusing on Chinese style, which has attracted investors.

Founded in 2019 in Changsha, capital of Hunan province, Tiger Attitude Chartered Pastry Bank acquired several rounds of investment in 2021 from organizations such as Sequoia China and Tiger Global.

Aiming to revitalize Chinese pastry, the brand uses low-sugar content to attract young customers. It has also collaborated with Chinese sportswear brand Meihua, domestic beverage company Jianlibao, and Television Broadcasts Limited (Hong Kong).

In the first 10 months of last year, Tiger Attitude Chartered Pastry Bank's new retail team achieved total revenue of more than 200 million yuan, while the bakery's stores earned an average of over 800,000 yuan a month each during this period.

Hu Ting, the bakery's founder, said it is improving and adjusting the layout of its stores in major cities. It has also announced that it is open for franchising, and that the first batch of its partner stores will start business after Spring Festival.

"We will also launch our overseas business so that more customers can enjoy our products," Hu said.





Chinese chess pastries (left) and walnut cookies (right) created by Daoxiangcun. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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TOP NEWS

Support rallied to aid virus fight in rural areas

Medical equipment and COVID-19 drugs sent, procedures in place for safe treatment

By **WANG XIAOYU**
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Oxygen equipment and COVID-19 drugs have been pouring into China's rural areas in concerted efforts to strengthen medical capacity in the countryside to fight the disease.

Wang Huibo, a volunteer at the Fosun Foundation, brought 200 bottles of the domestically developed COVID treatment Azvudine to Xinmin township, Sichuan province, on Jan 19 and distributed them to elderly residents with the help of local healthcare workers.

"Logistics networks are under strain during the holiday. Though the village is remote and coming here in person means an arduous journey, we think it's totally worth it to bring these drugs into the hands of people who need them," he said.

Like other oral COVID pills, Azvudine should be taken within five days of the first sign of symptoms to help prevent high-risk patients from becoming seriously ill. However, as a prescription drug, administering it to patients should be overseen by a physician.

"We came here a bit concerned over whether these drugs can be put into proper use, but it is a big reassurance to see that local health officials have devised procedures after much deliberation," he said.

Wang said village doctors had been asked to notify elderly people in advance and brief them about the medication.

At the township's health clinic, elderly people register their name, age, telephone number and the name of the rural doctor assigned to monitor their health condition before picking up the medication.

"An expert from the county-level hospital also accompanied us to supervise the procedure, and help give instructions on taking the drug, such as patients with kidney problems should have a health checkup at a hospital and consult a doctor before starting treatment," he said.

Xiao Jianhong, head of the health bureau of Shimian county, which administers Xinmin township, said that although the peak of recent infections has passed, the 40-day Spring Festival travel rush from Jan 7 to Feb 15 poses fresh challenges. "The shipment of 1,000 bottles is indeed timely assistance," he said.

The Fosun Foundation, together with drug manufacturers Fosun Pharma and Genuine Biotech, will donate Azvudine worth 100 million yuan ($14.7 million) to rural areas.

To blunt the impact of outbreaks in the countryside, a group of senior health experts based in Shanghai has established an expert committee aimed at improving rural doctors' knowledge of COVID-19 prevention and treatment.

Chen Erzhen, vice-president of Shanghai's Ruijin Hospital, which is affiliated with Shanghai Jiao Tong University's School of Medicine, said during a recent training session held by the committee that rural doctors should improve their ability to detect patients at risk of developing severe cases. This includes identifying telltale symptoms of low oxygen levels in blood and delivering treatment to patients as early as possible.

Efforts to increase the availability of essential medical equipment have also accelerated.

The State Council has sent 32 working groups to rural areas to survey the people's needs and mobilize resources to address the most acute demands. The actions resulted in a nationwide campaign to equip each village-level health facility with two pulse oximeters, which measure the oxygen saturation in blood, and each township-level health center with an oxygen concentrator.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, by Jan 17, Cainiao Logistics, which offered to make deliveries, had sent nearly 1.18 million pulse oximeters to rural areas.

Yuwell Group, a medical equipment manufacturer, offered to donate more than 11,500 oxygen concentrators for rural health clinics in previously impoverished counties. The company prioritized production of these donations and sent them within a week.

"We have coordinated and united multilateral efforts to bolster antivirus support for rural areas," said Mao Dezhi, an official at the ministry. "We have not only sent medical equipment to rural areas, but also provided them with guidance and services to help resolve their medical demands and ensure that they can overcome infection peaks."

Guo Yanhong, head of the National Health Commission's medical emergency department, said the commission has been increasing stockpiles of key medical equipment, including oxygen bags and cylinders, oxygen concentrators and pulse oximeters.

"We have also set up a mechanism to monitor and allocate drug inventories," she said on Jan 19. "So far, the shortage of common drugs at township health clinics has been greatly eased."

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Enter the dragon



People watch a dragon dance performance during Lunar New Year festivities at Penang Miao Hui, which translates as temple gathering, on Saturday in George Town, Penang Island, Malaysia. VINCENT THIAN / AP

Protectionism weakens US trade, experts say

By **YIFAN XU** in Washington
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Protectionist United States trade policies in recent years have brought a bigger trade deficit and job losses, weakened the country's productivity and diminished its diplomatic leadership, trade experts said.

The policies "just during the (Donald) Trump administration, added over $100 billion to the US trade deficit", said Jack Midgley, principal of global consultancy Midgley & Co and an adjunct associate professor in the security studies program at Georgetown University in Washington.

"That's an immediate adverse impact. The job losses associated with that impact are in the hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs. So that's another negative impact on the US economy," Midgley said.

Gary Hufbauer, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, said: "This trend has a decidedly negative impact on US productivity growth, now less than 0.5 percent annually. In the good old days, it was nearly 2 percent annually. And US diplomatic leadership is badly weakened by the current trend."

In a policy brief titled "Have trade agreements been bad for America?" published last month, Hufbauer and Alan Wolff, another senior fellow at the Peterson Institute, said that "expanded trade has greatly benefited the US economy" and "protectionism is not the solution".

According to the brief, global trade and liberalization have helped lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty worldwide and helped raise the GDP of the US tenfold since World War II, but protectionism under former president Trump and his successor, President Joe Biden, has undermined US authority globally.

"US-China trade has been very beneficial for the US over the past two decades," Hufbauer said. "I am very sorry this is not recognized by most US political leaders."

Hufbauer said he expects a "standstill" in US-China trade ties over the next two years, with ties not getting much worse, but not getting much better, either.

Hufbauer predicted that Republicans in the US Congress would continue to call for new international trade agreements, but he was skeptical about whether Biden or US Trade Representative Katherine Tai would respond.

Instead, they will continue to negotiate the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and "try to calm the electric vehicle dispute with the European Union," Hufbauer predicted.

He also said he expected the US to impose more sanctions on Russia, even if a cease-fire in Ukraine was negotiated, Hufbauer said.

Midgley predicted that there would be no big US moves for advancing trade this year, because of the macroeconomic environment and domestic politics.

In addition, he said that due to "the prospect of a recession next year, plus the political environment ... I doubt very much that there will be advances ... in the area of free trade with China."

"What is happening is that the United States is continuing to emphasize energy independence (and) massive increases in defense spending and defense investment, and a lot of that is crowding out attempts to liberalize trade policy."

Political pressure from the US House, which Republicans now control, will favor protectionism, he said.

Health: Nation among pioneers in developing vaccines

From page 1

The campaigns often feature slogans and public service announcements that aim to raise awareness about the importance of taking care of one's health. It is important to note that at the global level, the Patriotic Health Campaign in China was one of the first examples of multisectoral action for health, as it involved the collaboration of various government ministries and departments to improve citizens' health.

China has effectively used patriotic health campaigns in recent years to tackle specific health issues, including COVID-19. These campaigns have emphasized behavior that can help prevent the transmission of the virus, such as wearing masks, regularly washing hands and maintaining a distance from others.

China strived to save lives and ensured safety and protection through mass sanitization of population centers. When the world faced high mortality rates, China's remained low.

The Chinese government is aware of the need for continuous adjustments to the policy as well as innovative implementation mechanisms to ensure resiliency. There is another social indicator enabling China to sustain its resiliency against the shock of the pandemic — the social safety net whereby the Chinese government provides the masses with subsidies, material support, household items and health insurance.

It is important to note that at the global level, the Patriotic Health Campaign in China was one of the first examples of multisectoral action for health, as it involved the collaboration of various government ministries and departments to improve citizens' health.

Research and development in the health sciences enhanced China's capacity to contain the virus, because the nation was among the pioneers in developing the vaccines that have helped authorities achieve results. This gave China the confidence to set the dynamic zero-COVID policy goal for two years, focusing on the public and adjusting according to their needs. The joint public efforts enabled health and administrative authorities to keep social and economic conditions in line as the virus mutated.

Later, China shared its first-hand experience of handling COVID-19 with friendly nations, including Pakistan, where Chinese health officials shared scientific research and formed partnerships for the joint production of vaccines. Chinese health officials and workers, including doctors, nurses, scientists and technical experts, were sent to other countries, including Pakistan, to share experiences in reinforcing public health.

These efforts became global when more nations were willing to learn from Chinese expertise in epidemic management. The dynamic zero-COVID approach resulted in low mortality rates in other countries while reflecting each nation's realities and requirements. It is pertinent to acknowledge that mutation of the coronavirus continues, requiring constant monitoring and effective response.

Given the constant mutation, China has initiated a range of measures in several sectors, including the financial industry, to enable preemptive capacity in fighting the virus. These measures will enable China to sustain economic growth, support the global economy and reinforce the international health regimen.

China has emerged as an effective pandemic control model for the world to contain the virus and mitigate its impacts through changes that are customized to meet each nation's requirements.

The author is founder of the Friends of BRI Forum. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Ties: Washington's two-sided approach will trigger greater concerns, analysts say

From page 1

At the same event, former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger said that "each nation needs to understand the other more fully".

"While working together, we can achieve great things; not just for our countries, but also for humanity," he added.

Analysts said that Washington's two-sided approach to China has damaged its ties with Beijing and will trigger greater concerns among the rest of the world if it persists in its provocations, such as allowing US lawmakers to visit Taiwan.

Washington's military cooperation with the Taiwan region "is, in essence, a part of the US policy of containing China", Talat Masood, a retired Pakistani Army lieutenant general and a former federal secretary, said in an article published in The Express Tribune newspaper on Wednesday.

Michael D. Swaine, a senior research fellow of the East Asia Program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft in Washington, recently wrote that Washington should place clear limits on its interactions with Taiwan "to emphasize that they are unofficial and do not involve contacts between senior officials".

> "While working together, we can achieve great things."
>
> **Henry Kissinger,** former US secretary of state

Su Xiaohui, an associate research fellow at the China Institute of International Studies, said Washington has displayed its urgent need to step up strategic communication with China by highlighting its hopes about Blinken's China visit.

"In fact, the US cannot steer away from directly talking to China if it really wants to install 'guardrails' for their relations and deal with its own economic headaches, such as soaring inflation," Su said.

"Washington is still unwilling to risk crossing the line drawn by Beijing, but it cannot resist the temptation to work on some provocations, so it remains to be seen how it will work to manage differences and avoid crises," she added.

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CHINA

Four standouts from the past 12 months

Editor's note: *China Daily reporters recall events or stories from the past year that have stayed in their thoughts.*

Dedicated delivery drivers impressed me

By CAO YIN
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As a journalist reporting on the rule of law, I've often interviewed legal professionals and written a lot of stories about how China has advanced law-based governance.

Last year, though, I spent more time writing about ordinary people whose lives deserve to be recorded.

Last spring, I traveled to Shanghai. I spoke with many people who were working hard to keep the city running as it experienced its worst COVID-19 outbreak since the epidemic emerged more than two years before.

Long Anhua, a truck driver, was one of the interviewees who impressed me a lot.

At the time, a large number of deliverymen were locked down in their own homes to curb the spread of the disease, so e-commerce giants and logistics companies replenished stocks and expanded their courier fleets throughout the city to make daily necessities more accessible to those residents who had stayed home.

This meant employees such as 51-year-old Long often had to work overtime or even through the night.

As drivers were on call at night to ensure urgent deliveries could be completed, eating and taking naps in their trucks became their routine.

> "We can never let a baby go hungry, and deliveries of some drugs can be a matter of life or death in this difficult period when it's hard for residents in lockdown to go to the hospital."
>
> **Tian Dan,** logistics worker

Long told me that he had not been able to return to his home in the city, so he had been living a nomadic life since Shanghai was hit by the epidemic in late March last year amid a resurgence of COVID-19 cases.

Watching the lights in nearby buildings being turned off at night and on again in the morning while driving to deliver fruit and vegetables, he said, "I miss my wife and children."

He recalled that one evening he had been tasked with delivering supplies to the compound where he lives. "How I wished I could go back home at that moment," he said.

Tian Dan, 34, was another impressive interviewee. She was also busy with nighttime deliveries, but she had to work even faster than Long because she was delivering medicines and milk powder to meet specific demands citywide.

Every time she drove to a neighborhood, she left medication at the community gates and phoned the buyers to tell them their goods could be collected. All the steps were completed in a just few minutes as she was in a race against time.

Sometimes, she expressed anxiety or even guilt because she lost her way in some subdistricts she had not visited before, meaning deliveries took longer than usual.

"I don't want customers to wait for a long time," the mother of two girls told me as she drove her car to take a bag of medicines to the Shuangshan community to treat a child's asthma.

"We can never let a baby go hungry, and deliveries of some drugs can be a matter of life or death in this difficult period when it's hard for residents in lockdown to go to the hospital."

Most of the time, it was close to midnight by the time she had delivered all the parcels and returned to a dormitory assigned by her employer.

Usually, she opened a tub of instant noodles for dinner and began watching videos of her children that had been posted by family members.

Long was the same. While he was awaiting his next mission or the packages were being loaded, he sat in his truck and contacted his wife via video calls. Finally, after saying good night to her, he began looking at the photos and short videos she had posted.



Cao Yin (front center) attends a media call in Shanghai on May 25 as doctors and nurses prepare to return home after providing medical assistance in the city for about two months. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Home once again after so long away

By JIANG CHENGLONG
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On Jan 8, the Chinese mainland scrapped all quarantine requirements for inbound travelers.

As I watched reports of Chinese who had been away for a long time arriving and tearfully hugging their loved ones at the arrival gates of the Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport, many emotions welled in my mind.

Last year, as a correspondent based in New York, I almost ran out of energy as I undertook the procedures to return to China.

In January last year, an outbreak of the aggressive Omicron variant in the United States meant all flights to China were canceled for a time. Having spent nearly $7,000, I secured a San Francisco-Shanghai ticket on a flight set to take off two months later.

Seven days ahead of the departure date, I flew to San Francisco and visited the designated agencies to undergo three separate COVID-19 tests and then spent a week in a hotel where my health was monitored.

Only when all the tests came back negative was I permitted to board the flight; otherwise I would have had to fly back to New York, rebook a ticket and undergo another round of tests.



Jiang Chenglong reports from Times Square, New York, on Dec 19, 2020.

I arrived in Shanghai in March last year and returned home to Anhui province after 28 days in quarantine.

However, when my father welcomed me at home, I realized that he was not as healthy as he had been in 2019 when I left.

He had undergone surgery for esophageal cancer, but his recovery had been poor and he had become dramatically emaciated. When he opened the door to me, we hugged each other tighter than ever before.

Thus, I could totally understand the feelings of those people reuniting with their families at the airport in Shanghai.

After my two-year-plus mission in the US, I began covering diplomacy and defense topics, especially China-US ties. Before, I had thought that geopolitics was far from us ordinary people, but now, having witnessed unprecedented Sino-US tensions as a US-based correspondent, I understand that they affect everyone worldwide.

In 2020, China Daily and four other Chinese media outlets were labeled "foreign missions" by the Trump administration, and all journalists from the Chinese mainland were required to renew their US visas every 90 days. A strong sense of uncertainty seeped into my life in the two years that followed.

Meanwhile, the US wouldn't issue press visas for new correspondents from the Chinese mainland, which meant we would not be replaced and would have to extend our stay, regardless of strong homesickness.

Just like those people who were unable to fly back to China in the past three years, we are all insignificant and powerless in the face of time and geopolitics.

When my flight to San Francisco departed New York and flew above Manhattan, the city was almost back to normal.

Now, it's China's turn and I can see a familiar world returning. Sadly, my father died a few weeks ago, and Sino-US ties are still highly tense.

Three years have passed: some things haven't changed, while others have changed forever.

Museum needs far more space

By ZHAO LEI
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As a reporter covering China's space programs, I have a Lunar New Year plea for the Beijing Municipal People's Government: please give the China Space Museum a bigger, nicer venue.

In November last year, the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, the nation's biggest manufacturer of carrier rockets and the museum's owner, invited me to attend the reopening ceremony of the facility and be given a guided tour.

I had visited the museum several times before it was relocated last year.

The old version was in the strictly guarded China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology complex in a southern Beijing suburb. It was small and in poor condition, which was understandable because the building was constructed 30 years ago.

Built and opened to the public in 1992, it was China's oldest museum dedicated to the space industry and spaceflight.

Media communication officers at the academy had told me that the museum's development was tremendously restricted by its location and internal space, and that the academy's leaders and the museum had been striving to find a new venue for it.

So, when one of them told me over the phone that the renovation work had finished at the relocated museum and invited me to become one of the first visitors of the new premises, I was happy to accept the invitation and looked forward to seeing it.

Sitting in a minibus carrying reporters to the museum, I visualized a much bigger, fancier facility, filled with the carrier rockets, satellites and spaceships I had written about many times. I was also thinking about bringing my daughter to visit, because the 4-year-old is already a fan of aircraft and spacecraft.

I was a little frustrated when I saw the new museum as it is still small and located on a typical old-fashioned street dotted with unimpressive eateries and shops.



Zhao Lei is seen standing beside the reentry capsule of the Chang'e 5 lunar probe at an exhibition hosted by the China National Space Administration in Beijing.

Inside, it appeared crowded when the guides showed us, their guests, around.

Most of the spaceflight-related exhibits such as rockets and satellites — as a matter of fact, there are not so many of them — are scale models rather than the real thing.

I am not writing this to complain or express disappointment: I know that the employees of the rocket academy and the museum have tried their utmost to make the best use of the space allocated to them, and they have carefully designed the exhibition areas and visitor routes.

They also spent a lot of time and energy collecting a large number of precious historical documents from institutes, universities and enterprises.

They even set up a scale model of the Wenchang Space Launch Center's launching structure that contains many moving parts to show visitors how a Long March 5 heavy-lift rocket is moved from its assembly tower to the service tower and then launched.

In short, they definitely spared no efforts to make the museum as beautiful, informative and attractive as possible.

What I am trying to say is: no matter how hard the museum workers try, they just cannot defy physical laws and reality because it is impossible to fit real rockets, satellites and spaceships in the limited room they have. Furthermore, the museum is only able to receive a modest number of visitors every day — should they be willing to come to the southern suburb from downtown.

In recent years, China has sent a robot to the far side of the moon in a world first, and has placed a rover on Mars in the country's first interplanetary adventure.

The nation has also constructed a large space station that is expected to orbit the Earth for at least a decade.

All of these technological and engineering marvels testify to China's achievements in space exploration and its rise in the global space arena.

These feats deserve wide, in-depth coverage, (which is the duty of reporters like myself) and decent places and panoramic displays at any given museum, especially the China Space Museum.

"We are terribly sorry, but we really don't have enough space for these new programs." I would hate to see such a scenario become a reality.

Our space authorities have continuously spoken about promoting knowledge and the culture of space exploration among youngsters.

Then, please start by allotting a larger, more convenient place for the China Space Museum, and let's build it into China's answer to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

Winter sports are finally coming in from the cold

By CUI JIA
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On Jan 1, I returned to the white-capped mountains in Chongli, Hebei province, where the snow events of the 2022 Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games were held about a year ago.

As I stood at the top of a slope in the Genting Snow Park and prepared to ride my snowboard, the memories started to flood back.

As a reporter covering both Games, I watched the legendary Shaun White from the United States take a bow after finishing his final half-pipe performance as a professional snowboarder, and as 18-year-old Su Yiming rocked the men's snowboard slopestyle event in front of his home crowd.

More importantly, I truly understood how snow sports have transformed the lives of people with disabilities and boosted their confidence. Seeing them in action was such a treat and so inspiring.

As a snowboarding enthusiast, I can now fully enjoy the legacy of the Games, such as more convenient transportation from Beijing to ski resorts in Chongli, improved facilities and better courses.

In the Genting Snow Park, the well-designed Games' competition venues for the half-pipe, cross and moguls events are open to the public, giving enthusiasts the opportunity to taste life as a Winter Olympian.

In the first post-Games snow season, people have found that getting onto the piste is easier and more pleasant than ever. Also, they no longer need to worry about COVID-19 control measures.

One of the key goals of hosting the Games was to get more Chinese involved in ice and snow sports. As ski resorts around the country are packed with people, I believe the mission has been accomplished.

I also noticed that more children have started skiing or snowboarding at an early age as facilities have become more accessible and affordable in recent few years.

Don't be fooled by their cuteness, though, because some are already highly experienced.

As I cruised down the advanced course, I spotted a child in a red helmet who rode beautifully. Even the sharp curves didn't slow him down. I gave him a thumbs-up at the end of the course and he gave me a fist bump in return.

The 9-year-old Beijinger, nicknamed Duoduo, has been snowboarding since he was 5. Su is his idol, so Duoduo followed all his events during the Beijing Games.

When I told him that I attended the Games as a reporter, I saw the envy in his eyes. Now, though, I envy him because I knew very little about skiing or snowboarding when I was his age.

On Feb 16 last year, the Winter Olympian — the official English newspaper of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics published by China Daily — used Su's picture on the front page after he won gold at the men's snowboard big air event. The headline read, "Birth of the Superstar."

Well, I believe a super generation of snow sport athletes has been born in China. Just wait until they grow up!



Cui Jia (right) stands with Olympic Games torch bearer Dinigeer Yilamujiang after an interview in Chongli, Hebei province.

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CHINA



The testing personnel of Haikou Customs Technology Center carry out experimental treatment on duty-free cosmetics on Dec 15, 2022. PHOTOS BY ZHANG MAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

Duty-free shopping fuels boom in Hainan's economy



Engineer Liang Heming receives the duty-free goods for inspection, on Nov 14, 2022.

Hainan province's liberalized offshore duty-free shopping policy, which is part of its ambitious free-trade port development, is attracting growing interest from powerful Chinese online and offline retailers who hope to enter the market. With an aim of boosting the high-quality construction of the Hainan free trade port, an announcement on Hainan's offshore duty-free shopping policy was issued and came into effect on July 1, 2020.

The duty-free policy is expected to boost domestic consumption and help attract overseas consumption. Statistics from Haikou Customs showed that it has supervised a total of 101.7 billion yuan of duty-free sales, or 140 million items, from a total of 13.61 million consumers when they left the island from July in 2020 to December in 2022. Over the past years since the implementation of Hainan's offshore duty-free policy, customs officers have worked together to ensure the offshore duty-free goods enter the county smoothly and safely so that consumers can purchase high quality duty-free goods.

CHINA DAILY



Inspectors take samples of duty-free cosmetics and carry out testing and analysis, on Nov 14, 2022.



Customs staffers conduct inspections on duty-free goods and check the product information, on Nov 7, 2022.





A senior engineer Pang Shunan takes out the duty-free cosmetics samples and carries out the element analysis on Nov 14, 2022.





Above from Left to Right: Customers pick up commodities at Haikou International Duty Free City in Haikou, Hainan province, on Oct 28, 2022. The world's largest single duty-free shop Haikou International Duty Free City attracts many consumers to wait in line for duty-free goods, on Oct 28, 2022. The ship carrying the duty-free goods enters the port, and is released after being inspected on Jan 13, 2023.

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WORLD

Pandemic control shift seen as economic boon

ACCRA, Ghana — The easing of COVID-19 restrictions in China will contribute to the restoration of global supply chains, a Ghanaian expert says.

Alex Ampaabeng, a fiscal policy specialist who works for the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in Ghana, said the optimized COVID-19 control measures in China are welcome news for the global economy because they are likely to help increase trade between China and the rest of the world.

With China optimizing its COVID-19 measures, inflation caused by inadequate supply could be brought under control, he said.

In China over the weeklong Spring Festival holiday, consumption soared, with cinemas packed and scenic spots teeming with tourists.

China's travel frenzy and shopping spree during the holiday season mirrored the vigor of the country's economy and bolstered people's confidence in the resumption of the world's second-largest economy, Ampaabeng said.

China is one of Ghana's biggest trading partners, and the latter could potentially enjoy a rise in domestic revenue earnings as a result of the Chinese government's decision to relax COVID-19 restrictions, he said.

China's refining policy is also seen as a boost to world tourism.

A Ruili Airlines flight, carrying more than 100 passengers from Kunming, landed in Sihanoukville in southwestern Cambodia on Friday, receiving a warm welcome from local authorities.

Speaking to reporters at the welcoming event, Hor Sarun, secretary of state for Cambodia's Ministry of Tourism, said Cambodia is ready to welcome all Chinese people and tourists.

Chea Aun, secretary of state for the State Secretariat of Civil Aviation, said he expected the number of Chinese tourists to Cambodia to reach pre-pandemic levels within a couple of years.

In the southeastern Mexican state of Yucatan a local official is looking to boost cultural and trade exchanges with Chinese counterparts to attract Chinese tourists.

Chinese travelers are usually deemed as "seekers of new experiences" with a love for learning and culture, said Miguel Andres Hernandez, undersecretary of market intelligence at the Yucatan Ministry of Tourism Development.

"The Chinese market is one of the most important for us, and we will continue trying to enrich and increase our twinning to generate a larger flow of tourists," said Hernandez, referring to the pairing of Yucatan with two Chinese provinces, Anhui and Sichuan.

Yucatan and Anhui signed a twinning agreement in 2014, and the Mexican state signed a memorandum of understanding with Sichuan on strengthening their partnership last year.

Pairing two geographically distant places as twin or sister cities or regions is a common practice of local governments to expand cultural and trade ties. Such twinning is "a spearhead to attract tourism and generate exchanges in good practices", Hernandez said.

The state rich in tourism resources can offer colorful experiences, from romantic beachside getaways to adventure tourism, he said.

Yucatan views tourism as a way of strengthening cultural exchanges and spurring the economy. The state has set its sights on the Chinese market as part of its tourism recovery strategy, he said.

XINHUA



Cambodian officials welcome Chinese travelers at Sihanoukville International Airport on Friday. XINHUA



Industrial inferno

Smoke clouds are seen after seven factories and warehouses caught fire at an industrial cluster near the US-Mexico border in Tijuana, Baja California state, Mexico, on Saturday.
GUILLERMO ARIAS / AFP

China vital for global growth, expert says

With policies seen on the right track, 'robust recovery' of economy tipped

UNITED NATIONS — China can play a significant role in stimulating global growth this year, Hamid Rashid, a leading United Nations economist, said after the flagship report World Economic Situation and Prospects 2023 was published on Wednesday.

The past year was rough, but in 2023 China "can play a very important role in stimulating global growth", said Rashid, chief of the Global Economic Monitoring Branch, Economic Analysis and Policy Division, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

"I think all the ingredients for recovery are there. We are very optimistic about the recovery in China."

Rashid, the report's lead author, expressed confidence that China's economy will experience a "robust recovery" this year as its policies are aligned correctly, meaning that fiscal policy and monetary policies are "in the right direction".

There has been no tightening of monetary policy (in China), which is quite reassuring because that would have probably suppressed economic growth, he said.

China's economy is well placed to grow because its inflation has been low, despite high inflation elsewhere, he said.

China still has "a very low inflation rate" compared with other countries, he said, which is an exceptional advantage.

The global financial crisis in 2008 transformed China into the engine of the global economy, Rashid said, and restoring the country's role as an engine is good news for many other developing countries.

Intersecting crises

World Economic Situation and Prospects 2023 paints a gloomy picture of the global economy and warns that multiple and intersecting crises are likely to exacerbate things, with growth set to slow from 3 percent last year to 1.9 percent this year.

Rashid emphasized the need to invest in productive capacity, promote human capital and combat climate change, adding that by making these investments, the world will "come out of this difficult time" as they will have "high multiplier effects", leading to higher growth and reducing inflation.

"China has done it very well over the years" because the government "can actually steer the recovery", he said.

Considering the importance of China's economy to the rest of the world, Rashid said the country consumes both commodities and tourism goods.

Citing tourism as an example, Rashid said it is a major source of revenue for many countries including Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

"Europe now depends on Chinese tourism. And China plays a very important role in global tourism."

Growth in outbound tourism will benefit many countries that depend on the industry, he said.

China has very strong trade ties with other manufacturing economies in the region, including Japan and South Korea, he said, and those two countries, among others, benefit from China's recovery when it recovers well.

The Chinese economy will be on a trajectory of "not only recovery, but sustained recovery" if the pandemic can be controlled, Rashid said.

"We are facing difficult economic times where international cooperation can play a very important role in restoring global confidence."

XINHUA

Decline in COVID-19 cases seen in Africa

By **EDITH MUTETHYA** in Nairobi, Kenya
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For the first time since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Africa has not recorded an upsurge in cases following the Christmas and new year travel season.

While expressing cautious optimism over sustained containment of the pandemic in Africa, the World Health Organization also warned resurgences are likely due to circulating variants and urged countries to remain alert.

Data from the United Nations agency indicate that Africa recorded 20,552 new infection cases in the first three weeks of January, translating to a 97 percent decline compared with the same period last year.

Associated COVID-19 deaths stood at 88, a 99 percent decline over the same period last year.

The declines in both COVID-19 cases and deaths came despite a rise in cases in South Africa, Tunisia and Zambia over the past two weeks.

"For the first time since COVID-19 shook our lives, January is not synonymous with a surge. Africa is embarking on the fourth year of the pandemic with the hope of moving past the emergency response mode," Matshidiso Moeti, regional director for WHO Africa, said during a virtual news briefing on Thursday, attributing the decrease partly to low testing rates.

Two major waves

Africa was hit by two major waves of the pandemic driven by more transmissible and lethal variants in 2021, but the WHO said the continent had no major peaks last year.

With gradual decreases in COVID-19 cases over the past year, the WHO said a low-level transmission of the virus is expected to continue in the coming months with possible occasional rises.

Despite the low number of cases, Moeti urged African countries to stay alert and have measures in place to effectively detect and tackle any upsurge in infection, noting that variants continue to circulate.

She said Botswana and South Africa have detected the Omicron subvariant XBB.1.5, one of the sublineages with public health implications.

Vaccination rates still remain low in Africa even though countries have stepped up efforts to broaden the exercise since last year, posing major health risks.

As of Jan 23, almost 30 percent of Africa's population had completed the primary vaccination series, with only four countries in Africa having vaccinated more than 70 percent of their populations.

To increase further coverage, Moeti urged African countries to integrate COVID-19 vaccination into routine healthcare services that take the needs of the most vulnerable into account.

"So far, 12 African countries have started integrating COVID-19 vaccination as part of regular health services," she said.

Philippines buoyed by highest growth in decades

By **PRIME SARMIENTO** in Manila
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Philippine economic growth rose to 7.6 percent last year, the highest annually since 1976, as easing of COVID-19 restrictions spurred domestic consumption. That expansion is among the highest in Asia.

Household spending rose 8.3 percent and government spending rose 5 percent, authorities said. The Philippines is an economy driven by consumption, which accounts for more than 80 percent of its GDP.

The 9.2 percent growth in the services sector likewise contributed to GDP growth last year. Exports of goods and services rose 10.7 percent.

"Our improved COVID-19 risk management and the easing of mobility restrictions have created a positive economic outlook, boosting economic activity and creating more jobs despite external headwinds," the Philippine Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said on Thursday.

Pent-up demand combined with new jobs had boosted consumption especially in the last three months of the year, he said.

Balisacan expressed his optimism about the country's "high-growth trajectory". The resumption of face-to-face education, increased business activity and a rebound in tourism will produce "ripple effects" that can support other sectors affected by the pandemic, he said.

The optimization of China's COVID-19 control measures will also be a boon to the Philippines, he said, given the strong economic ties between the two countries. China is one of the country's biggest markets for exports and tourism.

On Tuesday the Philippine Tourism Secretary Christina Frasco personally welcomed the first contingent of Chinese tourists arriving in Manila since China's optimized COVID-19 control measures were adopted.

However, Balisacan said external headwinds will ease Philippine economic growth this year, and he forecast that GDP would slow to 6 to 7 percent this year.

Michael Ricafort, chief economist of the Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation in Manila, said the easing of COVID-19 restrictions will not only boost the Philippine economy but also aid global recovery and reduce the risk of a recession in the United States.

"Philippine GDP is already back to pre-pandemic levels, but challenges remain."

High inflation, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and rising global commodity prices will temper the country's economic outlook this year, he said.

Last month inflation in the Philippines was at a 14-year high of 8.1 percent because of steep rises in food prices.

Ruben Carlo Asuncion, chief economist of the Union Bank of the Philippines, said economic growth may slow this year because of a possible global recession resulting in "weaker external demand and ... the potential drag of higher interest rates and elevated inflation".

Balisacan said the government is working to tame inflation.

Torrential downpours and flooding in NZ wreak havoc and leave four dead

WELLINGTON — New Zealand's death toll from heavy rain rose to four on Sunday, as flash floods and landslides in the North Island continued for a third day.

Battered by record-breaking rainfall since Friday, New Zealand's largest city Auckland remained under a state of emergency. MetService, the country's weather forecaster, warned of more severe weather on Sunday and Monday. Intense rainfall could also cause surface and flash flooding, it said.

"We know that there is potential for more adverse weather tonight," Auckland Emergency Management controller Rachel Kelleher said.

The emergency covers large swaths of the north island, with Waitomo District declaring a state of emergency late on Saturday.

A man missing after being swept away on Friday in Onewhero, a rural village about 70 kilometers south of Auckland, was confirmed dead, police said.

"The most horrific part of it is that we've lost lives," Deputy Prime Minister Carmel Sepuloni said in Auckland.

Climate change is causing episodes of heavy rainfall to become more common and more intense in New Zealand, though the impact varies by region. Climate Change Minister James Shaw noted the link to climate change on Saturday when he tweeted his support for those affected by flooding.

Police said on Sunday that they were assisting with traffic management and road closures in Waitomo after heavy rainfall "caused numerous slips, flooding and damage to roads".

In nearby Bay of Plenty, police said there was also "widespread flooding", as well as a landslide that had knocked down a house.

Thousands of properties remained without power, while hundreds were without water, authorities said.

Still, an Air New Zealand spokesperson said international flights in and out of Auckland, disrupted from Friday, would resume at noon on Sunday.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins, who has just assumed office, flew by helicopter over Auckland on Saturday and toured flood-hit homes. He described the flood impact as "unprecedented" in recent memory.



Cleanup begins at a historic home that was knocked off its foundations in a large slip on Sunday in Auckland, as flash floods and landslides in the North Island continued for a third day.
LYNN GRIEVESON / GETTY IMAGES

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WORLD

Undercover video about Pfizer vaccine process causes stir

By **HENG WEILI** in New York
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A viral undercover interview has focused attention on the process that Pfizer Inc uses to update its COVID-19 vaccines.

The video of the interview, conducted by Project Veritas, a journalistic outlet known for undercover tactics, was published on Jan 25 on social media channels such as Twitter, where it had been viewed more than 25.8 million times as of Sunday evening.

It shows a conversation between an unidentified Project Veritas reporter and a Pfizer employee identified as Jordon Trishton Walker, director of research and development-strategic operations and mRNA scientific planning. Walker said later that he believed he was on a date with the person who interviewed him.

"One of the things we're exploring is like, why don't we just mutate it [COVID] ourselves so we could create — preemptively develop new vaccines, right? So, we have to do that. If we're going to do that, there's a risk of like, as you could imagine — no one wants to be having a pharma company mutating f---- viruses," the 5-minute, 31-second video shows Walker saying to the reporter at a New York City restaurant.

"Don't tell anyone. Promise you won't tell anyone. The way it [the experiment] would work is that we put the virus in monkeys, and we successively cause them to keep infecting each other, and we collect serial samples from them," he said.

"You have to be very controlled to make sure that this virus [COVID] that you mutate doesn't create something that just goes everywhere.

"From what I've heard is they [Pfizer scientists] are optimizing it, but they're going slow because everyone is very cautious — obviously they don't want to accelerate it too much," Walker said. "I think they are also just trying to do it as an exploratory thing because you obviously don't want to advertise that you are figuring out future mutations."

A second video shows Project Veritas founder James O'Keefe confronting Walker after the interview.

"You work for Pfizer," O'Keefe says, sitting down at a table across from Walker. "My question for you is why does Pfizer want to hide from the public the fact that they're mutating the COVID viruses?"

Walker becomes visibly upset and responds that he was "literally trying to impress a person on a date by lying".

"Why are you doing this to someone who's just working at a company to literally help the public?" Walker asks. He then made a call to the NYPD and is seen in a scuffle with the Project Veritas camera crew in an attempt to stop their recordings.

Walker's position at Pfizer is mostly involved with business development, according to the techarp.com website, which posted a job description, and not vaccine processes.

On Friday, O'Keefe tweeted that YouTube had taken down the video, which at that point had 800,000 views.

The Project Veritas story has received scant coverage in US mainstream media despite the buzz it has generated.

Pfizer released a statement at 8 pm on Friday but did not mention the Project Veritas video or Walker's role at the company: "In the ongoing development of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, Pfizer has not conducted gain of function or directed evolution research. Working with collaborators, we have conducted research where the original SARS-CoV-2 virus has been used to express the spike protein from new variants of concern.

"This work is undertaken once a new variant of concern has been identified by public health authorities. This research provides a way for us to rapidly assess the ability of an existing vaccine to induce antibodies that neutralize a newly identified variant of concern. We then make this data available through peer reviewed scientific journals and use it as one of the steps to determine whether a vaccine update is required."

The Pfizer statement, however, said that "in a limited number of cases when a full virus does not contain any known gain of function mutations, such virus may be engineered to enable the assessment of antiviral activity in cells".

The company added that "in vitro resistance selection experiments are undertaken in cells incubated with SARS-CoV-2 and nirmatrelvir in our secure Biosafety level 3 (BSL3) laboratory to assess whether the main protease can mutate to yield resistant strains of the virus".

Some Republicans in Congress are calling for an investigation of the New York-based pharmaceutical giant, alleging that it is engineering "mutations" of the coronavirus for future financial benefit.

US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who is a member of the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, called for an investigation.

"The Pfizer Director...is caught on video discussing mutating the virus to change the vaccines & how Covid is a cash cow!" Greene tweeted Tuesday. "Pfizer took BILLIONS of federal [dollars]. Our Covid Select Subcommittee MUST investigate!"

Another member of the House COVID committee, Representative Ronny Jackson, a Texas Republican and former White House physician in the Obama and Trump administrations, called for an investigation.

"CLEAR YOUR CALENDAR @pfizer!" Jackson tweeted. "I'm sure the committee to investigate Covid will have questions on this!!"

On Thursday, Senator Ron Johnson, a Wisconsin Republican, posted on Twitter: "Federal health agencies have been captured by Big Pharma and grossly derelict in their duties throughout the pandemic. It's time for Congress to thoroughly investigate vaccine manufacturers and the entire COVID vaccine approval process."



People mourn a married couple killed in a shooting attack on Friday by a Palestinian gunman on the outskirts of Jerusalem, at their funeral in Beit Shemesh, Israel, on Sunday. RONEN ZVULUN / REUTERS

Jerusalem clashes erupt amid deadly escalation

World calls for restraint and calm in latest Israeli-Palestinian violence

JERUSALEM — Clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police erupted in Jerusalem on Saturday night in the wake of a series of deadly incidents in the holy city and the West Bank, prompting world leaders, officials and organizations to call for calm and urge restraint in the escalating violence.

Israeli police entered Arab neighborhoods in the city looking for anyone who may have helped the assailants in the previous attacks, sparking clashes with Palestinians.

According to media reports, tensions have recently escalated between Palestine and Israel, with violence and conflict on the rise. On Thursday Israeli forces clashed with Palestinians while conducting a raid in the West Bank city of Jenin, leaving more than 10 Palestinians dead. The next day a terrorist attack outside a synagogue in East Jerusalem left seven people dead.

On Saturday morning a 13-year-old Palestinian from the city was reported to have shot at a group of Israelis, wounding two of them.

Also on Saturday, the Israeli Defense Forces said a Palestinian shot at a restaurant near the Dead Sea. There were no casualties, and the shooter fled from the scene.

At least 30 Palestinians and eight Israelis have been killed in violence this month. Last year more than 150 Palestinians and more than 20 Israelis were killed in clashes between the two sides, the highest number of deaths in years, the United Nations said.

Palestine blamed Israel for the current "serious" tension.

"We hold the Israeli government fully responsible for the dangerous escalation that the situation has reached due to its crimes of killing, its continuation of settlement, the annexation of land and the demolition of homes," a statement by the Palestinian leadership said after President Mahmoud Abbas held a meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

30
Palestinians and 8 Israelis
have been killed in violence this month

"These policies are a result of the Israeli occupation government's evasion of its commitment to implement the signed peace agreements and its violation of international resolutions."

The Palestinian leadership warned of a deterioration that could threaten security and stability in the entire region.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Saturday that forceful and timely measures would be taken following two attacks carried out by Palestinians.

Swift response vowed

"Our response will be strong, swift and accurate," he said before a meeting of the security cabinet.

He announced a series of punitive steps against the Palestinians, including plans to step up Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank.

The announcement cast a cloud over a visit this week by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and threatened to raise tensions following one of the bloodiest months in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in several years.

World leaders, officials and organizations had called for calm and condemned the escalating violence in Israel and the Palestine territories.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the attack outside the Jerusalem synagogue was "particularly abhorrent".

Regarding the recent escalation of tensions between Palestine and Israel, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said on Sunday that the pressing priority is to do everything possible to de-escalate the situation and for all parties, Israel in particular, to show calm and restraint so as to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control.

"We are deeply saddened by the civilian casualties caused by the Palestine-Israel conflicts," the spokesperson said, noting that China has monitored the recent escalation of tensions.

"We condemn all terrorist attacks targeting civilians and oppose excessive use of force."

US President Joe Biden, speaking with Netanyahu, said the synagogue shooting "was an attack against the civilized world", the White House said in a readout of their telephone call.

The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell strongly condemned "acts of insane violence and hate" after the "appalling terror attack" outside the synagogue.

Reacting to the Jenin raid, he stressed that "lethal force must only be used as a last resort when it is strictly unavoidable in order to protect life".

Egypt said it "strongly condemned" the synagogue attack and "any attack against civilians".

The foreign ministry urged Palestinians and Israelis to exercise restraint and cease provocations and aggression "to avoid sinking into a spiral of violence".

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Teachers march to demand better pay

LISBON — Tens of thousands of public school teachers and other staff members marched in Lisbon on Saturday to demand higher wages and better working conditions, putting further pressure on the Portuguese government as it grapples with a cost of living crisis.

Shouting slogans such as "For the banks there are millions, for us there are only pennies", about 80,000 protesters filled the Portuguese capital, police said.

A year after Socialist Prime Minister Antonio Costa won a majority in parliament, he is facing a slump in popularity and street protests not just by teachers, but also by other professionals such as doctors.

The Union of All Education Professionals, known as STOP, is demanding that the government increase the wages of teachers and school workers by at least 120 euros ($130) a month and speed up career progression.

The government has not made a counterproposal specifically for teachers, but has said it will increase the monthly salaries of all public servants who earn up to about 2,600 euros by 52 euros.

Teachers complain that because of career freezes in the past, they are the lowest-paid senior public servants, which means their financial situation has worsened after a recent spike in inflation to a 30-year high.

Teachers on the lowest pay scale are paid around 1,100 euros a month, and even those in the top band typically are paid less than 2,000 euros monthly.

"For years, they (politicians) kept us silent," said Isabel Pessoa, a 47-year-old teacher. "We need better conditions in terms of salary. It's unacceptable that we don't have progression in our careers."

Teachers and other education staff members across the country have been taking strike action since early last month, closing many schools and leaving students unable to attend classes. The strikes have been organized on an area-by-area basis with successive days of action in each of Portugal's 18 districts.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA



People react as school workers in Lisbon demonstrate for better salaries and working conditions on Saturday.
RODRIGO ANTUNES / REUTERS

Homeless camps illegal in US states

By **LIU YINMENG** in Los Angeles
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More unsheltered people in the United States are living in tents or sleeping on the streets as states and municipalities tighten rules to make homeless camps illegal.

At least 100 jurisdictions have laws restricting unhoused people camping in public spaces, according to the National Homelessness Law Center. California, Florida, New Hampshire and Texas have imposed blanket statewide camping bans.

A rising number of municipalities have approved statutes criminalizing homelessness despite the inadequate affordable housing options, made worse by the pandemic-related surge in inflation.

Such measures are needed to protect public safety and to discourage homeless people from living in unsafe and unsanitary conditions, city officials said. However, experts are concerned that the laws do not have the desired effect.

"Most measures that criminalize homelessness are reactive to public pressure rather than based on any evidence-based solution to homelessness," said Benjamin Henwood, director of the Center for Homelessness, Housing and Health Equity Research at the University of Southern California.

In addition, figures suggest that these measures are costly in terms of public dollars and do not fundamentally tackle the problem of homelessness, he said.

> "Locking up people because they have no place to go is both cruel and counterproductive."
>
> **Victor Regnier,** a professor at the University of Southern California

For example, between 2010 and 2014 criminalizing homelessness cost Colorado taxpayers $3.23 million, according to a study by researchers at the University of Denver.

Driven by the dearth of affordable housing compounded by rising living costs, the rate of homelessness across the country has continued to rise. According to federal figures, 582,462 people were experiencing homelessness in January last year.

The crisis has prompted more states and municipalities to enact ordinances to ban people from sleeping in public areas as a way of resolving the issue.

In Missouri, from Jan 1 anyone sleeping in places such as public parks or under bridges is liable to receive a citation for a misdemeanor.

"It focuses on diverting existing resources to programs which actually work and holding those programs accountable by comparing results," Bruce DeGroot, a former House of Missouri member, said on the day the bill was signed into law, St. Louis Public Radio reported.

City leaders in Portland, Oregon, approved a measure in November banning people living in tents. The ban will also create six large city-approved camping sites, and 20,000 units of affordable housing will be built.

Victor Regnier, a professor of architecture and gerontology at the University of Southern California, said the Portland policy "makes sense to me".

It creates places for emergency shelter that are adequate and develops an aggressive plan to build affordable housing, he said.

"The homeless population in California (and elsewhere) is a difficult population to reach because many have chemical dependency problems (drugs and alcohol) that are severe and often lock them into that situation."

The lack of housing supply and of affordable housing are the main causes behind the homeless crisis, Regnier said.

"Locking up people because they have no place to go is both cruel and counterproductive," he said.

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BUSINESS

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AI powers China's astronomical quest

Private, public sectors join forces to unleash potential of high-tech to create huge economic impact

By **CHENG YU**
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MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Artificial intelligence is helping China decode the universe for the world. By incorporating AI in the work done using the Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical radio Telescope, Chinese astronomers are trying to discover celestial objects and phenomena like pulsars.

FAST is the world's largest single-dish radio telescope located in Southwest China's Guizhou province. Pulsars, or rapidly rotating neutron stars, are among the research frontiers.

Study of pulsars can help researchers understand extreme states of matter and events like collisions of black holes. In an astronomical sense, a pulsar is equivalent to GPS used for ground navigation.

"For the first time, we were able to use AI to help find 22 pulsars, which included seven high-speed rotating millisecond pulsars with high scientific value in astrophysics," said Li Di, chief scientist of FAST, in an interview.

"Since the first discovery of pulsars in 1967, about 3,500 pulsars have been discovered globally. AI and other cutting-edge technologies have helped accelerate the systematic discovery of pulsars," he said. "Still, our discovery of 22 pulsars in a relatively short time is an impressive achievement."

Making that possible is China's emergence as a pioneer in the field of AI, which, according to market consultancy McKinsey, is expected to create $600 billion in economic value annually for China.

The tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference in mid-December also emphasized that China would build a modern industrial system and improve the global competitiveness of its traditional industries.

The conference stressed the need to speed up research, development and application of cutting-edge technologies in the fields of AI, new energy, biotech, green and low-carbon development and quantum computing, and work harder to develop the digital economy.

As AI is now penetrating various industries like manufacturing, healthcare and education, the hunt for pulsars and more unknowns vividly demonstrates there are no limits to the country's applications of AI, industry experts said.

The AI radio astronomy exploration project is led by a group of researchers from National Astronomical Observatories of the Chinese Academy of Sciences led by Li, and another group led by Chi Mingmin, a professor on data and machine learning at Fudan University.

Notably, tech company Tencent Holdings has also joined the project. It leverages the company's AI technologies and experience to help accelerate China's pulsar hunt.

According to Wang Chengjie, the lead researcher from Tencent's YouTu Lab, an AI research department of the tech giant, three steps are critical to discover pulsars: observation with a radio telescope, recording the signal and finding out the dispersed and periodic signal that meets the conditions.

"But the main bottleneck is how to find qualified signals from massive observational data," Wang said. "FAST generates huge amount of data and about 30 million to 100 million signal images per week."

To crunch all that data — it is not in megabytes, gigabytes or even terabytes but petabytes, where 1 PB equals 1 billion MB — AI and big data tech are essential, Wang said. "It is difficult to simply rely on human astronomers and quickly process such a huge amount of data only by existing programs, and that's how AI could help."

Tencent's YouTu Lab has applied its computer vision technology as well as its cloud computing and storage capability, to help FAST detect pulsars.

> "With the accelerated integration of digital technology and the real economy, the development of AI is no longer limited to tech breakthroughs in computing power, algorithms or data, but gradually deepening ..."
>
> **Wu Yunsheng,** vice-president of Tencent Cloud

Wang said: "After hard work, it now takes only three days for AI to complete the workload that used to take a year. AI has helped FAST to increase the efficiency of searching for pulsars by 120 times."

Wang said the future of astronomy will be data-rich. "As astronomers face an explosion in the amount of data generated from the next wave of telescopes, AI is expected to play a big role."

This year, Tencent and NAOC will also explore the M31 Andromeda galaxy, which will be the deepest and comprehensive search of pulsar-like compact objects in the galaxy neighboring the Milky Way.

Cai Zheng, an associate professor from the Department of Astronomy at Tsinghua University in Beijing, said, "AI has been deeply applied into various fields of astronomy, including cosmology, exoplanets, and planet formation, both at home and abroad."

He noted that China is quickly catching up with leading foreign countries in using AI to solve problems in astronomical research.

Globally, AI used by Facebook and Google has been employed by astronomers to study a phenomenon that Albert Einstein proposed in his Theory of General Relativity over 100 years ago.

"But leading foreign countries are better at leveraging latest AI breakthroughs, while Chinese astronomers and scientists tend to use mature algorithms," Cai said.

"To move forward, the biggest challenge is how to leverage AI to discover new physics beyond existing frameworks, or to unlock unknowns, to truly achieve scientific breakthroughs."

AI has sparked global competition in the field of industrial internet. Countries are betting big on cutting-edge technologies like AI and their applications across industries and sectors.

The State Council, China's Cabinet, said that by 2030, the scale of the AI sector in the country is expected to exceed 1 trillion yuan ($149 billion) and related industries will likely grow to a scale in excess of 10 trillion yuan.

Market consultancy International Data Corp predicted that China's AI investment is expected to reach $26.69 billion in 2026, accounting for about 8.9 percent of global investment, ranking second in the world.

McKinsey also forecast that the next wave of AI in various fields can create upward of $600 billion in economic value annually for China. For perspective, the 2021 GDP of Shanghai was around $637 billion.

Wu Yunsheng, vice-president of Tencent Cloud, said, "With the accelerated integration of digital technology and the real economy, the development of AI is no longer limited to tech breakthroughs in computing power, algorithms or data, but gradually deepening into industrial applications and social needs."

Shen Kai, a partner at McKinsey, and his colleagues said in a report that currently, driven by the world's largest internet consumer base and the ability to engage with consumers in new ways to increase customer loyalty, revenue, and market valuations, most of the AI applications that have been widely adopted in China have been in consumer-facing industries.

"Our research indicates that in the coming decade, there will be tremendous opportunities for AI growth in new sectors in China, including automotive, transportation and logistics, manufacturing, enterprise software, and healthcare and life sciences sectors," Shen said.

Earth to space, firms add value by innovating technology

REPORTER'S LOG
By Cheng Yu

It's easy for consumers to buy food and beverages like, say, a bowl of hot rice and mineral water online or from neighborhood shops, but for astronauts such things are, rather were, luxury goods.

Crew members of China's Shenzhou manned space flight last year, however, were able to enjoy such F&B, thanks to Joyoung, a Chinese home appliance firm. Joyoung innovated its technologies to create an improbable space kitchen for the astronauts. A drinking water dispenser, an air heater and a soybean milk maker were all accessible in the kitchen through a smart app.

There was more consumer tech customized for the spacecraft. A vacuum cleaner enabled haircuts by generating negative pressure that sucked in the cut hair so it would not float about or enter nooks or crevices.

China's private sector is growing in significance, emerging from the long shadow of State-owned enterprises that dominated business and industry for decades. Private enterprises are now using their latest technologies to contribute to even major national projects. What's more, they are also helping the country make technological advance.

The tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference in mid-December underscored that it is important to work unswervingly both to consolidate and develop the public sector and to encourage, support and guide the development of the private sector.

In fact, from small private businesses in provinces like Zhejiang and cities like Shenzhen, Guangdong province, to internet enterprises leading global technological advances, China's private sector has become home to various pioneers that help spur economic growth and innovative development both at home and abroad.

In recent years, they have contributed about 50 percent of the country's tax revenue, 60 percent of GDP, 70 percent of technological innovation and 80 percent of urban employment, according to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

Tang Hongbo, who was part of the Shenzhou manned spacecraft crew, said in a news briefing that during his three-month trip, he could eat hot food with just half-hour efforts, a contrast to the past when similar attempts required several hours.

"If we had time, we would also use customized devices to eat homemade yogurt. We could also control those intelligent devices in the space kitchen through mobile phone apps," he said.

In the past, most aerospace foods were packed in aluminum foil, so they couldn't be directly heated in a microwave oven. Conduction devices often caused uneven heating. An astronaut had to spend as long as four hours to heat some vegetables in the space kitchen.

To solve the problem, Joyoung developed a device that pumps out hot air to heat vegetables in a 360-degrees way. The gadget enables astronauts to eat even steaming-hot fish-flavored shredded pork and Gongbao chicken, a spicy, stir-fried Chinese dish.

Besides Joyoung, a group of private enterprises, including Xiaomi Corp and Huawei Technologies, have contributed their technologies to the development of the space station.

NOLO VR, a Chinese virtual reality manufacturer, has helped astronauts develop an experimental device through which laboratory technicians on the ground can see and experience vividly what astronauts are doing in the space.

Wang Peng, an associate professor at the Hillhouse Research Institute of the Renmin University of China in Beijing, said, "China's technological prowess will continue to play a big role if private and smaller businesses remain sound, given that many of them are increasingly being recognized for their role as leaders in new concepts and new business models."

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BUSINESS



An employee operates a production machine at a workshop of Jiangsu Golden Autumn Elastic Fabrics Co Ltd in Nantong, Jiangsu province, on April 18. The products are for orders to Vietnam, Pakistan and other countries. XU CONGJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

RCEP boosts trade growth amid gloomy global outlook

China becomes Vietnam's biggest importer of agricultural products

HANOI — Despite a gloomy global picture featuring rising fuel prices, inflation and disruptions to supply chains, two-way trade between China and Vietnam last year achieved high growth thanks to the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

"Since the RCEP went into effect on Jan 1, 2022, especially after China recently allowed the importation of a number of Vietnamese agricultural products such as durian, bird's nest, sweet potato and passion fruit, Vietnamese enterprises nationwide, including our company, have found big opportunities to export new products to their northern neighbor," Dinh Gia Nghia, deputy general director of Dong Giao Foodstuff Export Joint Stock Co in the northern Ninh Binh province, told Xinhua News Agency in December.

To increase export turnover to RCEP member countries, including China, Vietnamese firms must innovate technology and upgrade designs and product quality, Nghia said. "The RCEP has become a launching pad for us to increase product output and quality, as well as the quantity and value of exports."

His statement was echoed by both local farmers and officials of provinces that export fruit.

"I have just sold five (metric) tons of durian to traders for nearly 80,000 Vietnamese dong ($3.41) per kilogram, doubling the price in the same period last year (2021), thanks to the adoption of stricter cultivation standards," said Nguyen Van Hai, a veteran farmer in the Cai Lay district in the southern province of Tien Giang.

According to Nguyen Van Man, director of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development of Tien Giang Province, the fact that Vietnamese durian has been exported to China via official channels since September is a contributing factor to higher prices and bigger volumes of the fruit shipped to China.

The Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development under the Vietnamese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development said Vietnam earned nearly $50 million from exporting durian to China in October, skyrocketing 4,120 percent against the same period in 2021, an unprecedented increase in the history of the Vietnamese durian sector.

From Sept 17 to Nov 30, over 20,000 tons of the fruit were shipped to China via official channels and the volume is estimated to have surged to 30,000 tons by the end of December, said the institute.

Many Vietnamese companies are expanding material zones and improving fruit quality to boost their exports to China and other RCEP members.

"We are planning to increase the number of certified fruit cultivation areas, and enhancing the processing scale to have a sufficient supply of durian for export year-round, not just in season," Vu Ngoc Huy, deputy general director of Dung Thai Son Import-Export Trading Joint Stock Co in the central highlands province of Dak Lak, told Xinhua in December.

By the end of 2022, the company had 17 facilities for fruit purchasing and packing in Dak Lak and Tien Giang with more than 200 workers, Huy said, adding that its output of processed durian for export is about 50 tons a day.

Van Xuan Phat Import-Export Co in Ho Chi Minh City is also focusing on exporting fruit, especially durian and passion fruit, to China and other RCEP members.

"On Sept 17, we exported the first three containers of durian. After that, every month we export 1,000 tons according to our partners' orders," Nguyen Vu Thang, operation director of Van Xuan Phat Import-Export Co, told Xinhua.

Nghia at Dong Giao Foodstuff Export Joint Stock Co said that on the occasion of the Lunar New Year festival, the demand of the Chinese market accounts for more than 50 percent of Vietnam's fresh fruit exports.

In 2023, Vietnam's fruit and vegetable exports to China may increase by 20 to 30 percent, mainly thanks to smoother transport, quicker Customs clearance, lower tariffs under the RCEP agreement and e-commerce development, Nghia said, adding that his company is looking forward to exporting frozen durian to the neighboring country.

"Besides durian, other fruits such as passion fruit, banana, pineapple and mango still have many opportunities for export growth to China, as long as they meet the requirements of Chinese partners, like complying with full and strict procedures from planting to harvesting, preserving and packing," he said.

The Agency of Foreign Trade under the Vietnamese Ministry of Industry and Trade shared Nghia's view, saying that fruit and vegetable export turnover is expected to become bigger in the future because durian has been allowed to enter China, the biggest importer of Vietnamese fruits and vegetables, under official quotas since September. Bananas will soon follow suit, contributing to bigger overall trade between China and Vietnam.

Vietnam posted foreign trade value of $673.82 billion in the first 11 months of 2022, up 11.8 percent year-on-year, and China was its largest export destination, according to Vietnam's General Statistics Office.

With the RCEP's implementation, trade between Vietnam and other RCEP members, including China, will further surge in the coming years, Vietnamese officials and experts said.

XINHUA

Optimistic forecast for platforms in 2023

By CHENG YU
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China's tech and internet companies are expected to embrace a new round of growth this year, which will inject greater impetus into job creation and the country's economic recovery, said industry experts and company executives.

"Restoring expectations and confidence in platform companies this year will drive the promotion of high-quality employment," said Zhang Yansheng, chief researcher at the China Center for International Economic Exchanges.

"They can also maximize their role of driving the integration of digital technologies and the real economy to offer fresh impetus to new occupations," Zhang said.

The remarks were made following the tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference that took place in December. The meeting emphasized that platform companies — which mainly refer to tech and internet enterprises that leverage platforms to offer services — will be supported to "fully display their capabilities" in bolstering economic growth, job creation and international competition.

A report led by the Chinese Academy of Personnel Science said that over the next five years, Tencent's digital ecosystem is expected to help create 31.8 million new jobs, adding that the company has driven the development of 147 new job categories.

"As an important part of the new economy, the platform economy has undergone a period of healthy governance coupled with the gradual improvement of related laws and regulations, and it now has the conditions to radiate vitality and speed up further development," said Wang Xiaoming, head of industrial and technological innovation at the Institute of Science and Development at the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

"Amid internal and external economic uncertainties, platform enterprises are expected to play a leading role in driving both domestic economic growth and global industrial advancement," Wang said.

Shan Zhiguang, director of the information and industrial development department at the State Information Center, said: "Moving forward, a group of tech and internet enterprises will lead digital transformation in various industrial sectors, including consumption, entertainment and medical care.

"They will drive the formation of several innovation ecosystems related to artificial intelligence, cloud computing, blockchain, big data and processors. It will be a new normal for major economies to compete in the above-mentioned ecosystems."

A white paper released by the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology, a government think tank, showed that the market scale of China's digital economy reached $7.1 trillion last year, which was the second-largest globally.

"In terms of consumption, China's younger generations are stepping up to become the main force of luxury consumption. We are inspired to bring such strong demand to global brands and the consumer market," said Yang Bing, founder and CEO of POIZON, an online fashion marketplace for authentic branded sneakers and designer label accessories as well as luxury brands.

Moving forward, the platform will also leverage more technologies, including augmented reality and artificial intelligence, to drive more creative consumption experiences for young consumers, Yang added.

"This positive shift enables platform companies to not only lead development in various business sectors in the domestic market, but also compete further on the global stage in the future," said Wei Jianguo, former vice-minister of commerce and vice-chairman of the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, in an earlier interview.



Customers experience a mystery box machine of online fashion firm POIZON in Shanghai on Aug 21. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



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BUSINESSINSIGHT

Dual circulation still priority for China's development pattern

EAGLE EYE
By Ding Yuan

The term "dual circulation" refers to a new economic development pattern in which China's domestic market remains the mainstay with domestic and international markets reinforcing each other.

Driven by this paradigm, China was the only economy in the world with positive economic growth in 2020, and it continued to maintain a strong GDP growth rate of 8.1 percent in 2021.

However, after the first quarter of 2022, China's economy took a sharp downturn, and by October, the country's composite Purchasing Managers' Index, manufacturing PMI and nonmanufacturing PMI had all contracted, indicating a fall in economic growth (3 percent GDP growth in 2022).

So, why the Chinese economy plunged from the top of the world to its second-lowest point on record in the past 40 years? What are the challenges ahead?

Barometers of 'dual circulation'

Several indicators are crucial in implementing the dual-circulation strategy.

First, logistics plays a key role in smooth circulation. China's domestic circulation and economies of scale are made possible by its strong industrial foundation, comprehensive industrial chains and huge market. Links in economic operations — from production and distribution to final consumption of goods — have to be connected by logistics.

Second, smooth domestic circulation also hinges on the wellness and development of smaller, self-run businesses, which serve as the capillaries and nerve endings of industrial and supply chains.

The resilience of big companies is built upon their substantial economic and organizational resources, which provide them stronger risk mitigation capability. However, China could not have achieved socioeconomic dynamism and vitality without the contribution of the vast number of self-run businesses. To fully unleash their potential, a favorable business environment is needed to help them cope with uncertainties.

Lastly, business and consumer confidence is another useful indicator of economic circulation.

In the first three quarters of 2021, China's airlines, railways and roads operated normally, enabling people to travel around the country for business trips, to attend school, seek employment and visit relatives. At the same time, local leisure trips, short-distance tourism, rural getaways and night tours also emerged as new growth opportunities.

An important turning point in China's travel recovery over the past two years was the five-day Labor Day holiday in 2021, when Chinese tourists made approximately 230 million domestic trips and generated over 113.2 billion yuan ($16.8 billion) in tourism revenue, injecting confidence into the development of the sector.

Effective strategy but ...

The above-mentioned achievements speak volumes about the effectiveness of the dual-circulation strategy, which has allowed China to adapt to changes in the global landscape and seek new areas of growth. It is also a natural choice for the country as it evolves from a major economy to a strong economic power. In 2022, however, China's economic situation changed.

In the first three quarters of 2022, China's net exports of goods and services contributed 32 percent of the country's economic growth, and gross capital formation accounted for 26.7 percent of its GDP, 1.7 times higher than the level in the previous year.

This means that China's consumer spending played a diminishing role as the bedrock of its economy, as its contribution to the national GDP in the first three quarters dropped from 64.8 percent in 2021 to 41.3 percent in 2022.

On closer inspection, China's exports of mechanical and electrical products grew by 10 percent, while labor-intensive products grew by 12.7 percent, making them the two biggest sectors in terms of export growth in the first three quarters of 2022.

If this trend were to continue, it would pose setbacks to the supply-side reform that started in 2015, through which China took pains to cut overcapacity, reduce excess inventory and upgrade industries.

It would even undermine the dual-circulation system aimed at "selling products where they are produced and producing them where they are sold". In other words, while external circulation has continued to run — albeit not quite in the desired direction — internal circulation has been impeded.

In addition to the sluggish demand from high-end consumers, China's middle-income group has also tightened its purse strings. Official statistics showed that in the first three quarters of 2022, the per capita consumption expenditure of urban residents was 22,385 yuan, a nominal increase of 1.8 percent over the previous year. However, after accounting for price factors, it actually fell by 0.2 percent.

Driven by this paradigm (dual circulation), China was the only economy in the world with positive economic growth in 2020, and it continued to maintain a strong GDP growth rate of 8.1 percent in 2021.

Although per capita consumption of food, accommodations, household goods, transportation, communication and healthcare increased, consumption of clothing decreased by 1.1 percent, while that of education, culture and recreation fell by 4.2 percent.

In short, it is fair to say that China's obstructed domestic circulation was a result of tightened COVID-19 control measures, which made it difficult to unleash domestic demand. This weakened domestic circulation had a greater bearing on China's economy than any external factor.

Consider Vice-Premier Liu He's comments in People's Daily on Nov 4: "China can leverage its huge market size to stabilize and expand domestic circulation and drive international circulation. We should take effective measures to unleash domestic demand, build a unified nationwide market and break down obstacles to domestic circulation to ensure a medium level of circulation can be achieved under extreme circumstances."

In terms of international circulation, in the first three quarters of 2022, China's economy continued to grow at 3.9 percent by virtue of its exports and increased investment in infrastructure and manufacturing. By October, however, the country's exports contracted for the first time since the early days of the pandemic.

"There has been a shift in overseas consumer preferences, and the decline in goods consumption has reduced demand for Chinese product exports," said Zhou Hao, chief economist at Guotai Junan International.

Moreover, the International Monetary Fund has lowered the 2023 global growth forecast to 2.7 percent, and predicts that countries accounting for one-third of the global economy will likely contract this year or next.

In times like this, it is imperative to expand domestic demand and turn domestic circulation into a strong growth engine, while strengthening international exchanges to facilitate external circulation.

The fifth China International Import Expo held in Shanghai in November was attended by 284 of the world's top 500 companies and industry leaders, outnumbering the figure in 2021, nearly 90 percent of whom were regular exhibitors.

However, the CIIE can only give full play to its spillover effects when China's economic circulation stimulates business investment capacity and restores confidence among consumers.

Smooth economic circulation will give us much-needed leverage to expand domestic demand and unleash untapped market potential. It will also allow China to advance its high-level opening-up, share with other countries the opportunities presented by its sizable market and maintain mutually beneficial interaction with the international community.

In short, only when we remove various obstacles that hinder China's healthy domestic circulation can we lay a solid foundation for the country's economic growth and promote the dual circulation of domestic and international markets.

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



CAI MENG / CHINA DAILY

Two scenarios put 2023 GDP growth at 7% and 5.4%

MAIN STREET
By Liao Qun

Overall, we believe China will see a robust economic rebound in the year of 2023, with such an assessment based on three perspectives.

First, most of the COVID-19 containment measures were largely removed by the end of 2022. The low growth base in 2022 will likely lead to a robust rebound and growth is likely to become resilient this year.

Second, policywise, the Central Economic Work Conference in December made clear that keeping economic growth stable will be the top priority this year. We expect the deficit-to-GDP ratio to exceed 3 percent this year as part of an eased fiscal policy stance and we expect three or more cuts in the reserve requirement ratio as part of an eased monetary policy. Support for small and medium-sized enterprises will be enhanced, while more support has been given to the platform economy.

Third, in terms of external demand, despite sluggish global growth, countries are likely to fine-tune their fiscal and monetary policies to achieve a balance between curbing inflation and maintaining adequate economic growth. We expect that the global GDP will see a year-on-year growth of above 2.5 percent this year and global trade will grow by at least 3 percent. China's global trade typically rises faster than global economic growth.

Based on these three perspectives, we believe that China's economy will see robust growth this year.

However, the real question is, how robust will this rebound be? One of the key factors impacting the intensity of the rebound is how long it will take for people's lives to return to a state of normalcy. This is extremely critical. If it takes more than half a year to see people's lives returning to normal, growth is still likely to be sluggish.

Looking at things globally, countries vary in terms of the amount of time they take to get people's lives back to normal. Many countries saw an economic rebound within a quarter or two after they lifted their pandemic-related restrictions. Overall, the "return to normalcy" period for the majority of countries has been within five months. This is the current benchmark that we can use as a reference, and it's likely to be the same for China.

Taking every possible scenario into consideration, we will analyze two possibilities. Starting from December 2022, with the easing of containment measures, one scenario involves people's life returning to normal within three months and things getting better in February. The other scenario is that it will take five months, with April marking a return to normalcy.

In the first scenario, growth will bounce back in the first quarter. In the second scenario, growth will rebound starting from early in the second quarter. Compared with other economies, China's economic rebound will not soon diminish after a quick start. On the other hand, it is likely to accelerate quite robustly.

In the first scenario, early in the current quarter, particularly around Spring Festival (late January), the nation is likely to see a peak in infection numbers. With a relatively high growth base compared with the first quarter of 2022, year-on-year growth for the first quarter of 2023 is likely to come in at 2.5 percent and accelerate to 10 percent in the second quarter.

The growth rate for the third and fourth quarters will be somewhere around 6.8 percent and 7.8 percent, respectively. Our expectations are that in the first scenario, GDP growth for 2023 will be around 7.0 percent.

In the second scenario, the GDP will contract by 1 percent in the first quarter. The economy will then quickly rebound and grow by 6.8 percent, 6.7 percent and 7.9 percent in the second, third, and fourth quarters, respectively. In such a scenario, we expect the country's overall GDP growth for 2023 to grow by 5.4 percent.

In these two scenarios, a 7.0 percent annual growth or a 5.4 percent annual growth is possible. The 5.4 percent recovery stands somewhere around China's potential GDP growth, which is between 5 percent and 6 percent. Such a growth rate can be seen as a "rebound recovery" as it will bring China's economic growth back to pre-pandemic rates. The 7.0 percent annual growth in the first scenario, then, can be seen as "revenge recovery".

Undoubtedly, realizing a 7 percent year-on-year growth will not be easy this year but we are hopeful. During the Jan 1 holiday weekend, places like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, Guangdong province, began seeing some spending booms. At the same time, macroeconomic policies should be put into high gear to support growth and anchor market expectations.

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

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COMMENT

Editorials

Latest Hong Kong maneuver another sign of Washington's sinister intentions

In a strongly worded response to the White House decision to extend and expand Deferred Enforced Departure for certain Hong Kong residents in the United States, the Office of the Commissioner of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong on Friday urged Washington to "forsake the pipe dream of containing China with Hong Kong", and "immediately stop the execrable show of interfering in Hong Kong affairs".

While the applicability of the national security legislation in Hong Kong in no way compromises the "one country, two systems" framework, the US has accused Beijing of undermining Hong Kong's autonomy. Those suspected of criminal wrongdoings, from street violence to collusion with foreign forces, and who fled the SAR after the introduction of the national security law, are being provided safe haven as "freedom fighters" worth protection.

What is a natural assertion of Chinese sovereign rights over the SAR is being utilized against Beijing as evidence of it curtailing the SAR's autonomy. Likewise, what in the mainland authorities' eyes is a means of maintaining stability and order is being distorted as a tool of suppression.

However, as the Foreign Ministry office in Hong Kong stated, "Hong Kong is China's Hong Kong, Hong Kong affairs are purely China's domestic affairs". The corresponding Memorandum on DED extension and expansion, it argued, defames the rule of law and human rights conditions in Hong Kong, maliciously attacks the national security law for Hong Kong, interferes in Hong Kong and China's domestic affairs, and openly tramples on the basic principles of international law and international relations.

Hong Kong is "moving forward steadily on the correct track of 'one country, two systems'". The true purpose of the US memorandum is to provide "those who oppose China and disrupt Hong Kong and fled overseas" with safe havens by manipulating visa policies, which "fully exposes the malicious US intention" to destabilize the SAR.

The US is hyping up the "consequences" of the national security law in Hong Kong to denigrate the legislation. The truth is around 230 people have been arrested by the SAR police authorities on suspicion of endangering national security, among these, a little more than 30 have been tried and found guilty in court.

This is in clear contrast with Washington's allegation of "continued and repeated attacks on the protected rights and freedoms cherished by people in Hong Kong".

The enactment of the national security law has played a decisive role in realizing Hong Kong's transition from chaos to governance and continued prosperity, by effectively countering the efforts of outside elements to instigate chaos in the SAR using local proxies. Due to its implementation Hong Kong is once again stable, united and thriving.

China containment a dead-end endeavor

It was reported on Friday that the Netherlands and Japan have agreed to join the United States in barring shipments to China of some of their most advanced equipment for manufacturing semiconductors. That will make it increasingly difficult for China to manufacture the chips it needs for its industries.

Although the agreement between the three parties is yet to be announced and it will take time for the deal to be implemented, China should harbor no hope of importing high-tech machinery from Western countries. It has become increasingly obvious that the country must pull out all the stops to develop the necessary technologies and equipment on its own, those for manufacturing semiconductors in particular.

Under the US' pressure, the Dutch government has already forbidden sales of its most advanced ultraviolet lithography systems to China. But the US has encouraged the Dutch to also limit sales of slightly less advanced ultraviolet lithography equipment. The deal reached Friday includes at least some restrictions on that equipment, according to reports.

But ultimately it is wishful thinking for the US to believe that anything it does with its allies to bar shipments of high-tech machinery and technologies to China will strangle the industrial development of the country, and thereafter contain its rise.

Instead, the US restrictions on the export technologies to China and its pressuring of its allies to do the same will only turn out to be a motivating force for this country to pool its resources to accelerate the endogenous development of core technologies.

Being self-reliant has long been a mainstay of this country's development, although it will continue to open up and be inclusive when it comes to its cooperation with the rest of the world in an increasingly wide range of areas. But what the US has been doing in its attempt to contain the rise of China has only made this country increasingly aware that it needs to keep the reins of its development in its hands.

China must pool its resources to develop the core technologies and machineries it needs, and it must focus on developing its economy with a view to overtaking the US. Doing so will make it impossible for the attempts of the US to contain China to succeed.

The more developed China becomes, the more opportunities it will have to cooperate with more countries. The larger it becomes as an economic giant, the more transnational companies will be attracted to its market. China believes that multilateralism and globalization are the way for humanity to go forward, their reversal leads to a dead end.

New tragedy exposes accomplice of the evil

The message US President Joe Biden expressed in his latest remarks on the death of Tyre Nichols on Friday after a conversation with the mother of the 29-year-old African American, who died on Jan 10, three days after five Memphis Police Department officers beat him during a traffic stop, is unequivocally clear: "I can only do so much".

He called on Congress to send the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act to his desk. When Senate Republicans blocked that bill, he signed an executive order that mandated stricter use of force standards and accountability provisions for federal law enforcement, as well as measures to strengthen accountability at the state and local levels.

But the way Nichols was brutally beaten by police officers, as the released video shows, naturally begs the question of whether it is an issue that can be addressed by such institutional patchwork measures, even if they are at the federal level.

The brutal and fatal beating of Nichols, and other incidents, clearly show that even if police officers are found guilty of using excessive force receive strict punishment according to the law — Floyd's murderer Derek Chauvin was sentenced to 21 years in prison — that's not enough to act as a deterrent to other police officers.

On June 27 last year, Akron, Ohio, police officers killed 25-year-old Jayland Walker following a traffic stop and car chase. The police officers fired more than 90 times at the African American when he was not carrying a weapon, and the autopsy results showed he was hit by 46 bullets.

Biden was correct in pointing out such tragedies have a lot to say and do with the image of the US, on "whether or not we are the country we say we are". But he was also telling the people that he would be no different from other presidents in evading the root causes of the problem, because addressing them would necessarily move the cheese of vested interests as it would incur fundamental changes in national wealth distribution pattern so as to grant African Americans fair development opportunities. Therefore, he will do what most of his predecessors have done, which is to try and prevent the pot from boiling over by giving it a gentle stir.

By doing so, the US president as well as the whole political system of the country have become an accomplice of the evil, which has, to Biden's disappointment, become a defining feature of the country.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

WTO ruling makes it clear who is doing trade bullying

At a meeting on Friday in Geneva on trade disputes shortly after the United States lodged an appeal against a series of World Trade Organization rulings involving China, Turkiye, Norway and Switzerland which found that US metal tariffs breached global rules, Chinese Ambassador to the WTO Li Chenggang called the US "a unilateral bully, a rule breaker, and a supply chain disruptor".

That is a justified claim, as well as the view of many countries bullied by the US in trade.

The WTO dispute settlement mechanism made rulings against the US late last year including the aforementioned metals ruling involving China and a separate dispute with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China over labeling which Washington also appealed against.

As predicted, the US, a long-time critic of the world trade body's dispute settlement system and a saboteur of it, has criticized both rulings, claiming overreach.

It is ridiculous that the US has taken it as an opportunity to accuse China of imposing "illegal unilateral retaliatory measures" on US exports without saying that it was its own unilateral trade bullying behaviors that had left Beijing no choice but to act reciprocally to defend its rights and interests.

Shame onUS Deputy Trade Representative Maria Pagan for blaming the WTO for its rulings against the US by calling it an organization "that serves to shield China's non-market policies and practices", as if the US' trade war, long-arm jurisdiction behaviors, rules-bending state subsidies, clique-building practices and decoupling attempts are all "market policies".

Pagan should be reminded that as for the metal disputes, the WTO rulings have protected the interests of at least Turkiye, Norway and Switzerland as well, and the US should be reminded that as long as it wants to stay in the world trading system it must follow the rules that it has agreed on, and it cannot impose its own rules upon others.

Li said, China hoped that the US would show due self-restraint and not appeal against every unfavorable panel report into a void that it had created itself.

The WTO will not be able to review Washington's appeal of the metals case because its top appeals bench is paralyzed after the US blocked the appointment of new judges. That should serve to expose to all what a destructive role the US has been playing in the WTO and the rules-based international order and global supply chains as a whole.

In response to Li's reasonable criticism of the US on trade issues, which should spur any sensible mind on the US side to review the nature of its behavior and rectify its malpractices, Pagan told the media "You can call us whatever names you want".

That shows how shameless the US trade policymakers have become in the poisoned atmosphere of US domestic politics, and how far they are divorced from reality and have drifted away from common sense.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

Domestic tourist industry needs to raise its bar

During the seven-day Lunar New Year holiday that ended on Friday, mainland travelers made a total of 308 millions trips, up 23.1 percent year-on-year, generating tourism revenue of 375.84 billion yuan ($55.4 billion) according to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Despite that growth, the number of trips and level of spending were still below the pre-pandemic level. The number of trips was 88.6 percent of that of 2019, and the tourism revenue 73.1 percent of that of 2019. Although the strict novel coronavirus control measures had only been lifted earlier this month, the fewer trips and lower revenue still indicate the weaker spending power of tourists.

Another notable problem is that after being in suspended animation for three years, the services and management of the tourism and the catering industry, as well as the supervision of them, lag markedly behind the demands of the people.

To avoid stampedes, some tourist attraction spots had to cancel their activities at the last minute. Tourists also complained about exorbitant prices, the hotels and traffic during the long-awaited holiday.

That means some chronic maladies of the tourism industry have remained, if not become more prominent, after three years of hibernation. The tourism administrative departments and industry associations — whose hindsight in helping tourists address their concerns also appears unchanged — should be aware that the domestic tourism industry will soon face fierce competition from overseas.

If the services and management of the domestic tourism industry always fall behind the Chinese tourists' expectations, not only will the country fail to attract tourists from overseas, but also Chinese tourists will unavoidably vote with their feet, with many tourist resort countries in Southeast Asia and Europe eagerly anticipating the return of Chinese visitors.

In that case, the Chinese tourism industry will readily be defined by its own shortsighted thirst for quick money at the lower end of the global tourism industry chain. That is incompatible with the country's striving for high-quality development and is a waste of the country's rich tourism resources and huge tourism market.

— THEPAPER.CN

What They Say

Healthy competition can spur innovation

Thirty-one provincial-level regions recently disclosed their gross domestic product and related data for last year. The statistics provide much food for thought on the regional development gap in the country.

With a GDP of 12.91 trillion yuan ($1.9 trillion) and 12.29 trillion yuan last year, respectively, Guangdong and Jiangsu were the top two among all the provincial-level regions. The combined GDP of these two provinces accounts for about 20 percent of the national total, and is of a similar size with the total volume of the GDP of the bottom 15 in the rankings.

A few years back, Guangdong and Jiangsu's combined GDP was comparable to that of about 10 regions in the lower half of the rankings. The rise is relative to the deceleration of growth of the three provinces in Northeast China — Liaoning, Heilongjiang and Jilin.

For most of the last century, the three provinces, strong in heavy industry and rich in resources, known as the Ruhr of the Far East, were in the first half of the rankings. Now they have become the largest Rustbelt region of the country because of multiple factors, such as a brain drain, aging population, depletion of natural resources, out-dated management, and obsolete technology and equipment. Over the past two decades, the region has not yet hit upon a successful new development model or cultivated new reliable growth drivers.

It is the second echelon in the rankings, which consists of Shandong, Zhejiang, Henan, Sichuan, Hubei, Fujian, Hunan and Anhui provinces, whose GDP was between 4 and 9 trillion yuan last year, that is the main driving force of growth in the country.

Compared to the third echelon, such as Hebei, Shaanxi and Jiangxi, whose growth potential remains untapped, the second-echelon provinces either have their comparative strengths in industry structure or rich labor forces or are close to the Pearl River and Yangtze River delta regions, and they are crucial to promoting the country's high-quality development as a whole.

There is fierce competition among them as they are all striving to be first in the group. That's the same case for Guangdong and Jiangsu. Although Guangdong has topped the list for 34 years in a row, Jiangsu has quickly reduced the gap in recent years.

While tilting more resources to the less-developed regions, policymakers should make good use of the competition among provincial economies to turn it into a spur for innovation rather than a hindrance to integrated regional development.

— CHINA BUSINESS NETWORK

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COMMENT

China and the World Roundtable | China-US Relations

Editor's note: *As the world's two largest economies, China and the US are at critical stages of development. Faced with multiple challenges, China and the US need to increase communication and cooperation, and shoulder their share of international responsibilities, and work together to advance the noble cause of world peace and development. Four experts share their views on the issue with China Daily.*

Chen Qi and Xue Jing

China, US need to stop spiraling relations

With China easing the pandemic prevention and control measures, the world is wondering whether there will be a thaw in China-US relations and the two sides will restart normal communication in 2023. Hopes of a thaw in China-US relations rose after the meeting between President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia, on Nov 14, and the phone talks between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and newly appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang earlier this month.

Blinken will visit Beijing on Feb 5-6, marking the first trip by the top US diplomat in four years. US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is also expected to travel to China soon.

However, conceptual obstacles between the two countries are so hard to surmount that it would be over-optimistic to predict a substantial improvement in Sino-US relations soon.

Since assuming office in 2020, the Biden administration did not reverse, and instead strengthened the competitive strategy against China that his predecessor Donald Trump had championed.

Using its overall national strength, the United States tries to overpower its rivals through fierce competition. Accordingly, the US has labeled China as a major rival and dragged China into a fierce competition in all fields. And according to the Pentagon's National Security Report in October, the US has adjusted its military strategy to target China.

To isolate China, the US has spread anti-China sentiments across the international community by portraying China as a threat to Western society, institutions and lifestyle. It has also formed new anti-China alliances such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom and the US defense alliance) and the Quad (security partnership between the US, India, Japan and Australia). The US has roped in its allies and partners to squeeze China out of the global supply chains and to check its economic and high-tech development.

Since 2018, the US' machinations and strategy against China have undermined Sino-US mutual trust. And bilateral relations teetered on the brink of collapse after previous US House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August.

The root cause of today's crisis is the shrinking mutual trust and strategic mutual interests.

Misunderstandings and lack of cultural exchanges cause suspicion. The West believes international politics is a zero-sum game of power and views China's philosophy of peaceful development with



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suspicion. Such a mindset is driving the US to trigger another Cold War against China.

Besides, the US is too proud of its political institutions and values to accept the success of institutions that do adhere to the US way of thinking.

Instead of the disagreement on the international order and interests, the difference in political thoughts is at the root of the frigid China-US relationship today. And the two countries should sincerely communicate with each other, so as to figure out how to break the deadlock and revive normal bilateral ties.

Only if Washington abandons its sense of supremacy, and understands and respects non-US values and development models will the vicious spiral of China-US relations end.

However, the risk of China-US disputes escalating will remain, according to Alan W. Wolff, a distinguished visiting fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. First, even if the Biden administration wants to improve Sino-US ties, China will be constrained to reciprocate because of the hard-line anti-China stance prevailing in Washington, just like the reviving McCarthyism in the US Congress.

Losing control of the House of Representatives in the November midterm elections, the Democratic Party will have a hard time fulfilling its domestic agenda goals. So the Biden administration is likely to pay greater attention to making diplomatic achievements in order to ensure victory in the 2024 presidential election. For that to happen, however, the White House has to expand communication with China.

Bilateral channels of communication were reopened after the Bali meeting between presidents Xi and Biden. But anti-China rhetoric was used as a political tool to get more votes in the midterm elections — the ploy was used by both the parties — amid the polarization of US domestic politics. Worse, the Republican-led House of Representatives recently voted to establish a select committee on strategic competition with China.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Second, Washington has limited choices to improve relations with China. The anti-China alliances that the US has built using the carrot-and-stick policy are flimsy. Many countries have just paid lip service to the US' policies while sitting on the fence.

The US is facing the pressing problem of declining hegemony. Tensions have sparked between the US and its European allies due to the energy crisis following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the US Inflation Reduction Act. The US' influence has declined in the Middle East, too, while India has shown little interest in the US' "Indo-Pacific strategy" and has been importing Russian oil despite Washington's objections. And the rise of the left in Latin America in 2022 is a slap in Washington's face, while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has maintained its close economic ties with China.

In addition, Washington showing signs to improve its ties with China will render its anti-China cliques inactive, prompting Washington to calculate whether it needs such alliances.

The Taiwan question has come under the spotlight in China-US frictions and may become the last but the most disastrous card the US plays if it does not get satisfying results from the high tariffs, trade sanctions, supply chain disruptions, technology blocking and media warfare against China.

Washington does not want to lose the important tool to contain China so it has been more frequently interfering in affairs concerning the Chinese island of Taiwan, challenging Beijing's redline. In fact, the Biden administration has maintained strategic ambiguity on Taiwan while trying every possible way to hollow out the one-China principle. Such a contradictory narrative has narrowed the room for improving China-US relations.

But that does not mean China-US relations will head toward disaster.

China and the US have remained in agreement that the two countries cannot bear the consequences of decoupling. That's why they have been saying they are willing to maintain communication to avoid miscalculations and manage conflicts.

While China held the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the US held the midterm elections in 2022. Along with that, the meeting between the two presidents has opened a window of opportunity for the two countries to increase communication. If they can work together to improve bilateral relations and continue cooperation, they will benefit people not only in the two countries but also the whole world.

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

Brian Wong

Reforming cultural exchanges to help build stronger trust

The term "cultural diplomacy" is no neologism. Indeed, cultural diplomacy has long served as a core pillar of "track-II diplomacy," for example, engagement and exchange efforts between private citizens and individual actors. Ping Pong diplomacy qua sports/cultural diplomacy, too, played a pivotal role in reopening dialogue between China and the United States in the early 1970s.

For all the talk of "people-to-people exchanges" as per the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, and the US' emphasis upon "cultural and educational visits and tours" to China — one could be forgiven for thinking that the state of apolitical, non-partisan cultural ties straddling the two sides of the Pacific would be relatively robust.

Yet despite the historical depth and genuine goodwill that was built up over the past decades, through the efforts of individuals seeking to foster better understanding and interlocution between Chinese and US citizens, the past few years have seen a precipitous decline in exchanges of this nature. Routine, innocuous performances of certain plays, set pieces, or music with certain political connotations that may not conform to orthodoxy, have become invidious ticking time bombs for both performers and audiences alike.



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Similarly, previously active people-to-people channels and discussions on culture, as well as artist-in-residence exchange programs, have slowed down considerably under suspicions of alleged espionage or infiltration.

Let's face it. As things stand, cultural exchanges between the US and China are facing some rather treacherous and pronounced headwinds, and solving the problem is a prerequisite to restoring some semblance of normalcy in bilateral cultural ties.

Concerns about perceived political and national security risks are surrounding cultural exchanges and related institutions. That Confucius Institutes — broadly innocuous language-teaching institutions that nevertheless do adhere to certain stipulated boundaries and regulations concerning their contents and approaches to teaching — are now painted as vehicles for intelligence gathering is indicative of two fundamental facts. One, that there exists a significant volume of mistrust and uneasiness toward the presence of Chinese organizations or institutions, so long as they could be viewed as remotely affiliated with the state (even though such ties may not, as it turns out, necessarily hold). And two, that the Chinese government must take seriously the root causes for the extremely mixed and at times hostile reception toward its international cultural presence.

The dangers of over-securitization also apply to the way Chinese authorities engage with "Western" non-government organizations dubbed to be promoting cultural values and norms that are antithetical to the dominant zeitgeist or mainstream thought in China. It is necessary to recognize that the basis for cultural exchange is frank, open conversation and debate, and such conversations and debates cannot occur unless the state — especially one with incredibly potent apparatus — creates breathing space for such candid talk.

The deterioration in Sino-US relations over the past few years has rendered many in the field of arts and culture who straddled "both sides" feeling deeply perturbed. The hope is that with the meeting between President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia, on Nov 14, a degree of normalcy and trust could be revived in the relationship.

Both China and the US appear to be savvy enough to navigate both sides. On the Chinese side, there is a growing tendency to view cultural exchanges as opportunities to advance "correct values".

The best means for China to tell a "good story" about itself is through empowering and embracing the cultural grassroots and "fringes".

The same, of course, could be said of the pressures applied on cultural exchanges on the US side, where cultural, academic and art-based exchanges with China have either dwindled in numbers and intensity, or have been disproportionately criticized by politicians who endeavor to besmirch such exchanges as efforts to co-opt and destabilize. Such McCarthyist rhetoric would only drive away the many artistic and cultural talents born in China.

So what gives? Two preliminary thoughts and suggestions. The first is that cultural diplomacy should be championed and driven by cities, as opposed to countries. National governments tend to be bogged down by political considerations, and constrained in the range of options they can concurrently pursue. Cities, on the other hand, are far more flexible.

The second, is to devolve the leadership and spearheading of cultural exchange policies to private citizens and individual artistic-cultural groups. Track-II diplomacy is best left to the second track — the societies and performers acting according to their own volition, as opposed to particular state mandates or recommendations.

Source: Chinausfocus.com
The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Mark Pinkstone

Washington in disarray after House speaker debacle

A new theatre opens up in the United States with a new Congress sworn in after a comedy of hit and miss performance for selecting the speaker of the House of Representatives.

But what will it mean to China and the rest of Asia? Not much, but it will give President Joe Biden a hard time.

Biden, a Democrat, can no longer rely on support from the now Republican-led House in passing administration bills or funding requests as the country heads toward its $31.4 trillion debt ceiling. The national debt and its possible solutions are sure to be strongly debated in the House, leading to even more disarray within the law-making body.

Taiwan was not mentioned by Kevin McCarthy in his maiden address as House speaker. But he is a keen supporter of military aid to Taiwan and wished that he or another Republican had joined his predecessor Nancy Pelosi on her fateful trip to the island last year.

The Taiwan question will remain a thorn in the US-China relationship. The US is committed to the Taiwan Policy Act, and therefore while sticking to the one-China agreement, it will continue to support Taiwan's independence, a contradiction in terms of the policy.

Three days after taking the speaker's gavel, McCarthy set up a new panel — the "House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the US and the Chinese Communist Party" — to focus on China's competitiveness and the continued battle over agriculture



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and intellectual property. Interestingly, the panel targets the Communist Party of China and not China as a whole, leaving the door open for the US to continue support for Taiwan.

Leading the new committee is former US Marine Corps counter-intelligence officer Mike Gallagher who is no friend of China. He is still harping on about human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and is very likely to listen to the unverified and made-to-order reports from the US' plenitude of intelligence agencies.

In the House on Jan 10, Gallagher declared: "China is the only country with the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." The so-called "international" order is a US-contrived order to steamroll over everything which displeases the US.

In explaining why he set up the bipartisan panel, McCarthy told Congress: "One of my greatest worries about the future is that we fall behind Communist China. The fact of the matter is — the danger posed by our dependence on China is dire."

The committee has not got off to a good start, with 65 lawmakers voting against it. Among the opposition was Representative Judy Chu of California, chairwoman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, who raised concerns about the committee's potential to fuel xenophobia and violence against Asian Americans.

McCarthy is following in the footsteps of his namesake, former Republican senator Joseph McCarthy who, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, led a campaign to rid the US of all things communists. The extreme racist campaign known as McCarthyism was to rid the US of "the yellow peril" (sic). The campaign lost traction in the mid-1950s as US citizens grew tired of his misinformed rhetoric. But with the new McCarthy as speaker, McCarthyism is being rekindled, and we should not be surprised if he follows in his predecessor's footsteps with a trip to Taiwan just to provoke China's leaders.

Democrat Nancy Pelosi ran the Congress with an iron fist and abused her powers by going against the public advice of Biden and senior US military leaders of not visiting Taiwan to advocate and support the island's independence. Her irresponsible behavior almost triggered a conflict between the US and China. Her recklessness did not go unnoticed within the House, and the Speaker's responsibilities became a major issue.

Speaker McCarthy, a staunch Trump supporter, battled hard through 15 ballots before securing the coveted seat, but it was not without sacrifices. Hardliners insisted that the powers enjoyed and abused by Pelosi would not be carried forward, and now any individual member can move to oust him from office instead of calling for a motion of no confidence. He also caved in to a basket of demands from his colleagues, making him the weakest Speaker ever, and rendering his leadership virtually useless.

Although the Republican-led House is now weaker than ever and the Senate is run by the opposition Democrats, the law-making bodies of the US are now in disarray, and debates will be more about power grabbing than solving domestic and global issues.

As for Biden, he is all about keeping the lines of communication open with diplomacy while holding a spiked club behind his back. He is still obliged, by US legacy, to contain the rise of China while holding a mask of friendship. But the Taiwan question is the major obstacle to keeping the lines of communication on an even keel.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken will reportedly visit Beijing within the next few months as a follow-up of the Biden-Xi meeting in Bali late last year, and hopefully, it will lead to more open communication between the two major powers. Issues will cover the release of US prisoners in China and property and technology matters. Both will discuss global warming and climate change as well as the sanctions each has imposed.

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GLOBAL VIEWS

JORGE HEINE

Finding the way forward

Latin American countries' trade and investment decisions should be based on sound commercial reasons not ideology



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

With the inauguration of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on Jan 1, Latin America started 2023 on an upbeat note. In a ceremony attended by the representatives of countries on four continents, including Chinese Vice-President Wang Qishan, President Lula promised that Brazil would return to the regional organizations that the Bolsonaro government had withdrawn it from, such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Union of South American Nations.

The return of Brazil to the international fold, and the show of support by the governments of key countries committed to regional cooperation and coordination, create new possibilities. Latin America's fragmentation is not unrelated to its crisis since 2020, the worst in 120 years according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Although 2021, with a growth rate of 6.7 percent, signaled a recovery from the 2020 recession, the region still struggles to reach the levels of pre-pandemic economic activity, and economic growth projections for 2023 remain bleak, with estimates varying from 0.7 percent to 1.7 percent.

The twin impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have wrought havoc on the world economy, and Latin America has been hit especially hard. They have also led to shift in globalization and to the geopoliticization of international economic relations.

In this context, Latin America, a region that depends heavily on world markets and on foreign investment, must not fall into the trap of being cornered into taking sides. As part of the Western Hemisphere, Latin America has traditionally had strong links with the United States across a variety of fronts. But over the past 20 years, China has become an increasingly important partner, with Sino-LAC trade reaching a record $451 billion in 2021, and China now being South America's top trading partner. This should not be surprising: from 2013-21, China contributed 38.6 percent to world economic growth, which is more than the 25.7 percent of the G7 countries combined, according to the World Bank. And projections for 2023 indicate that the Chinese economy will pick up growth, to a healthy 5.3 percent.

While trade has been the main driver of Sino-LAC links, foreign direct investment, which was lagging behind, is now catching up. For a long time, the main destinations for Chinese FDI were the US and Europe. Yet, as Felipe Larrain and Pepe Zhang have shown, in 2021, Chinese investment in Latin America was $7-10 billion, around the level of that in the European Union ($8.5 billion) and higher than its investment in the US ($4.7 billion). In fact, Brazil may have been the country that received the single biggest amount of Chinese FDI in 2021, at $5.9 billion. The net result of all this is that whereas in 2016 Latin America represented 3 percent of Chinese yearly FDI outflows, today it represents between 5 and 10 percent.

If there is something Latin America does not need at this moment of acute economic crisis, it is to start making trade and investment decisions based on ideology. On the contrary, it should do so for sound commercial and business reasons. This implies, on the one hand, resisting US pressure to reproduce the historical alignment with the US based on the latter's hegemony and interests, and to aim for a more symmetric relationship. On the other hand, in relation to China, to recognize its significance as a key trade and investment partner, it should also move toward a more equal relationship, based less on a commodities-for-manufactured-products trade, as is largely the case today. To accomplish both tasks, the unity of purpose and action of Latin American countries is essential.

And this is one of the central tenets of Active Non-Alignment, a concept we set forth with my colleagues Carlos Fortin and Carlos Ominami in a new book, *Latin American Foreign Policies in the New World Order: The Active Non-Alignment Option*. Taking a page from the traditions of the Non-Aligned Movement, but adapting it to the realities of the new century, Active Non-Alignment provides a guide to action for Latin America, and the Global South at large, in a world in turmoil.

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ZHANG MING AND CHEN XIAO

Driver of global growth

Despite challenges, the upward trend of China's economy will become increasingly more evident as year progresses



SHI YUMENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

This year, the global economy is expected to undergo the following major changes: The relaxation of COVID-19 response measures by major countries could entail fewer shocks to global growth and the stability of supply chains. The peaking inflation rate in the United States could spur the Federal Reserve to halt its interest rates hikes in the first half of this year. While the continuation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict will buttress bulk commodity prices, the prospect of a global economic slowdown in 2023 will cap the rise in commodity prices. Therefore, we believe that the global economy has entered a new round of stagflation, and some economies such as the eurozone may fall into recession in 2023. In the next two to three years, geopolitical conflicts may pose a key threat to the world.

Against such an international background, there may be some changes in the external environment facing the Chinese economy. External demand will weaken significantly. The growth rate of China's exports could drop significantly with the slowdown in the world's major economies. With the Fed scaling back its interest rate hikes, the dollar index will gradually go down and expectations for the depreciation of the renminbi against the dollar will gradually weaken or even reverse. China will see slower capital outflows over the short term or even capital inflows. Ties between China and the US could pick up. After the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia, people-to-people exchanges between the two countries are expected to bounce back more quickly.

In the medium-term, China's economy faces external challenges including setbacks to globalization and a higher level of regional integration or the forming of blocs in terms of industrial chains and other fields. Meanwhile, with the Republicans taking control of the House of Representatives, the possibilities for the Democrats to be able to push forward major issues in the US have dropped significantly. The Joe Biden administration may place greater emphasis on its foreign policies. Therefore, China-US relations may face some fresh challenges in the next two years.

China's economy is still facing pressure from demand contraction, supply shocks and weakening expectations. There are some worrisome macroeconomic indicators in the fourth quarter of 2022, including a consecutive negative year-on-year growth rate in retail sales of consumer goods, the sharp drop in growth rate of real estate investment, and negative growth rate in the volume of exports and imports. The profit margin of businesses is being squeezed, and they have shown a lack of willingness for further investment.

China's economy is expected to gradually recover in 2023, but there are a series of challenges facing its recovery.

First, the pandemic has led to a significant slowdown in the growth of residential income and prompted a sharp decline in consumer confidence. Second, high commodity prices and cost of raw materials will squeeze the profit margins of enterprises in the upper and middle parts of industrial chains. Third, there are still hurdles for a significant rebound in real estate investments despite the portfolio of policies, including financing support in credit, bond, and equity for private businesses, rolled out in the sector starting from November, especially given the shifting expectations of developers and home buyers. Fourth, financial risks are still brewing. As China's economic growth continues to be lower than its potential growth rate, it is still necessary to stay alert against financial risks this year. For example, the continued downturn in the real estate sector and the frequent credit defaults by real estate companies may spread to the financial sector. Fifth, an important reason for the drop in the efficiency of economic growth is that various types of private enterprises are currently struggling. Greater policy support to enable the growth of private businesses is an important prerequisite for bolstering the efficiency of China's economic growth.

The focal point of policies right now is to bring the economic growth rate back to its full potential at an early date. Both fiscal policies and monetary policies should be eased, but fiscal policies should play a greater role in harnessing growth. Improving the efficiency of fiscal policy implementation is even more important than the easing measures.

In 2023, the fiscal policy should be further relaxed in terms of total volume. It is important to increase the deficit-to-GDP ratio in the central budget, including steps to bring the ratio back to at least 3 percent in 2023. The issuance of special-purpose bonds for local governments should be scaled up to at least 4 trillion yuan ($590 billion) this year. The scale of government bonds should be expanded, and the policy-backed developmental financial instruments, established with the support of the People's Bank of China, should be carried forward.

Meanwhile, the central government should improve the effectiveness of fiscal policies in the following aspects. First, it is important to improve the financing structure of infrastructure investment. Financing for investment into large-scale infrastructure projects should be provided through the issuance of government bonds. Second, the efficiency of special-purpose bonds for local governments should be bolstered, and the central government should give local authorities greater autonomy in the use of such bonds. Third, a counter-cyclical model for the oversight of debts borrowed by local platforms should be applied. The management of hidden debts borrowed by platform companies should be appropriately relaxed. Fourth, it is important to strengthen the coordination between fiscal and monetary policies. Fiscal policies should be proactive, and monetary policy should keep domestic interest rates at a low level.

There is still room and necessity for the further loosening of monetary policy. Since the second quarter of 2022, the central bank has carried out several rounds of cuts to the reserve requirement ratio — the proportion of money that lenders must hold as reserves as well as interest rate cuts. There is ample market liquidity and supply of credit funds. The demand for credit is what is truly lacking, which is manifested in the sluggish increase in new credits borrowed by enterprises and households. Therefore, a loose monetary policy should be put in place in 2023, and cutting interest rates is better than lowering the RRR to reduce the costs of enterprises and residents and help stimulate their credit demand.

To sum up, we believe that the growth rate of China's GDP will increase from 3 percent in 2022 to over 5 percent, or even 5.5 percent, in 2023. Considering that the global economic growth rate will drop from 3.2 percent in 2022 to 2.7 percent this year based on the forecast of the International Monetary Fund in October, the Chinese economy will once again become the most important driver of global economic growth in 2023. The global economy will embrace a pattern of a rising East and falling West this year. The upward trend of China's economy will become more obvious in the second half of this year.

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LIFE





Left: The "Longhorn Miao" ethnic community in rural Liupanshui, Guizhou province, is known for the women's unique hairstyle that features a headpiece shaped like a pair of long horns. **Center:** A mother helps her daughter with the headpiece that weighs about 3 kilograms each and takes at least 30 minutes to set. **Right:** A young Miao woman with the iconic longhorn headwear. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Customs worth celebrating

A museum long dedicated to the cultural and natural heritage of the Miao ethnic group is eyeing tourism, report **Yang Jun** and **Wang Jin** in Guiyang.

Up until the end of the last century, a group of people lived a primal lifestyle deep in the mountains at the juncture of the Liuzhi region and Zhijin county in Southwest China's Guizhou province.

With a population of around 5,000, members of this branch of the Miao ethnic group were easy to recognize due to the unique hairstyle of their women, featuring a headpiece shaped like a pair of long horns.

Even today on festive occasions, the women wrap samples of their ancestors' hair and black wool around the hairpieces and secure their large buns with white yarn. Apart from the headpiece that weighs about 3 kilograms each and takes at least 30 minutes to set, the women often wear striped pleated skirts and garments that have embroidery and batik designs.

The community lives a self-sufficient life through farming and weaving, yet has distinctive ethnic customs, folk instruments, songs and dances, and festivals that pay tribute to nature.

In 1995, Chinese and Norwegian scholars went on a field trip to Gaoxing village, one of the 12 villages where members of this Miao branch live. Three years later, China and Norway jointly established the Liuzhi Suojia Ecological Museum, considered the first of its kind in Asia.

"Unlike conventional museums, our museum includes two parts — the documentation center and the 'Longhorn Miao' community's exhibits. It's not simply a building displaying ethnic items, but a community of 12 villages. Their lifestyles, skills and beliefs are all at the heart of the museum's display and preservation," says Tang Zhuanjun, deputy director of the museum.

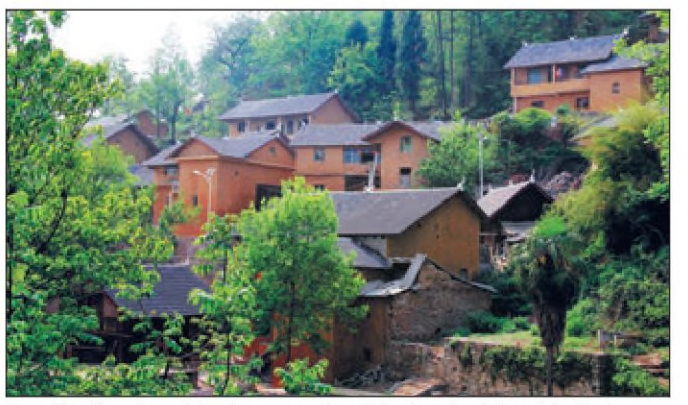
Apart from an exhibition hall that displays spinning machines, looms, ethnic attire and musical instruments, the center includes spaces for villager and visitor activities. The villagers are encouraged to treat the center as their second home, weaving and embroidering there, and participating in the management of the museum.

"The documentation center acts as a repository that records and stores information about the culture of this community, including its oral history, texts, photos, videos and representative cultural artifacts," Tang says.

"It provides extensive resources for the locals to learn and preserve their own culture, and offers external researchers and visitors key information about the culture."

A database has been established that stores oral history and video footage about the ethnic branch's intangible cultural heritage. Experts are working on preserving the material, conducting research projects, and publishing their results in journals and books.





Top: The "Longhorn Miao" community celebrates a traditional festival.
Above: The Liuzhi Suojia Ecological Museum in Gaoxing village, Guizhou.

Luo Gang, the museum's director since 2013, participated in its establishment in 1997, and has continued to work there. He often visits the villages to observe and record the changes taking place. As he says, the locals' attire, language, music and way of life are all "a unique type of artifact" that need to be preserved.

"Artifacts are like a ladder for us to trace our predecessors. They lead us step by step into the depths of history, so that we can reflect on our lives today," Luo says.

He says one of the museum's features is to encourage the locals' enthusiasm for preserving their traditional villages and taking the initiative.

As he recalls, tourism was not high on the museum's list of priorities, but as the museum has attracted tourists and the locals are increasingly engaged in tourism, he supports the combination of culture and tourism.

Local villager Yang Ermei says many tourists used to ask her whether there would be any performances, so she thought of the idea and discussed it with other villagers.

"It seemed to me like a good idea, because we could all perform and make some extra money near our doorsteps, so I gathered a team of a dozen performers," Yang says.

Since then, they started donning ethnic outfits and offering performances for tourists, including group dances accompanied by instruments such as wooden drums, *lusheng* (a reed-pipe wind instrument) and the three-holed *xiao* (a vertical bamboo flute).

Many tourists also buy embroidery pieces and garments as souvenirs.

Yang says she saw a business opportunity, bought an automatic loom, started selling memorabilia and later opened her own shop.

"We've also started to promote the products on short-video platforms. When I get too busy, I invite other villagers to work with me," Yang says, adding that she can now make more than 10,000 yuan ($1,480) per month, and the products incorporate creative designs.

"Looms are one of our most cherished devices, whether traditional wooden ones or the automatic ones. In the past, we couldn't live without them, and now we are using them to become prosperous."

Luo, the museum director, has applied for the local cultural elements to be included in the country's intangible cultural heritage lists of various levels. He hosts training sessions for the local youths to learn traditional crafts. So far, the museum has trained more than 1,000 people.

The museum also collaborates with the local primary school, inviting representative inheritors to give lectures every two weeks. The students, majority of whom are from the Miao community, have grasped their traditional crafts of embroidery and weaving.

Some of the handcrafted objects of the area have been preserved by other museums, and the song and dance performances have won multiple awards, including the 2013 Qunxing Award, China's top prize for amateur stage works.

Meanwhile, Luo is working to find a balance between development and preservation, especially when it comes to people's living conditions.

For generations, locals lived in thatched huts made of wood, earth or stone, which required regular changing of the straw covering the rooftops. In recent times, many villagers have decided to revamp their houses into concrete structures.

Because housing became overcrowded in Longjia, one of the protected villages, the local government built two new villages, one in 2002 and another in 2012, for those willing to move. In 2017, Luo learned that 10 villagers who were unwilling to leave their ancestral homes lacked the funds to renovate their dilapidated houses. He applied for government funding and worked with a renovation team to restore the wooden houses.

The museum plans to work with cultural and tourism companies to continue digging into the ethnic culture of this Miao group and further develop local tourism and agriculture.

"It is our goal to keep preserving the local characteristics by upgrading the documentation center and promoting the integration of culture and tourism. We are first a cultural organization working for public welfare. The display, preservation and research projects will continue to be conducted in order to make the museum truly a center for studying 'Longhorn Miao' culture," says deputy director Tang.

Contact the writers at yangjun@chinadaily.com.cn

What's on

Culinary culture



A Chinese saying goes: "Food is the paramount necessity of the masses." China has developed a thriving, diverse culinary culture that is reflected in the ways such as how food is cultivated, prepared and served, with food rituals related to politics, social well-being and family relations, as well as connections between China and the rest of the world built on food, tea and ceramics. The National Museum of China in Beijing is now hosting the touring exhibition *Chinese Culinary Legacies*, on the food culture in ancient China, at Ningbo Museum in Zhejiang province. Linked to social strata, for example, rice, meat and beverages were presented in different kinds of bronze ware at royal ceremonies during the Shang (c.16th century-11th century BC) and Zhou (c.11th century-256 BC) dynasties. Delicate crockery and tea sets formed part of high-society lifestyle in the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Culinary arts were depicted and hailed in traditional music, classic painting and poetry. Many intellectuals and artists were themselves gastronomes, such as Song Dynasty poet Su Dongpo who is said to be the creator of the popular braised-meat dish *dongporou*. The exhibition, running through to April 2, celebrates the scope and depth of the Chinese culinary culture and people's creativity in making it a national brand.
9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 1000 Shounan Middle Road, Yinzhou district, Ningbo, Zhejiang province. 0574-8281-5588.

Export fans

Among the many old export items from China, the fan is viewed as a special product that blended Eastern and Western cultural elements. *Canton Export Fans*, an exhibition now underway at Chengdu Museum in Southwest China's Sichuan province, shows beautiful fans shipped from South China's Guangdong province to clients mostly in Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are folding, round and rectangular fans made of paper, cloth and sandalwood, sometimes inlaid with shells or attached with wood carvings. Some fans were painted with Chinese landscapes and life scenes, opening for the users in the West a window to the East, its cultures and artisanship. Some other fans were ordered to depict Western motifs that exposed Chinese people to different cultures far away. The exhibited fans are from the Guangdong Museum, and on display until March 31.



9 am-8:30 pm, closed on Mondays. 1 Xiaohe Street, Qingyang district, Chengdu, Sichuan province. 028-6827-7011.

Yangzhou school

Over the 17th and 18th centuries, Yangzhou in Jiangsu province boomed in economic activity. Its prosperity as a trading center and openness in culture attracted artists and cultivated many art patrons. That was how the Yangzhou school, a loose group of artists in the realm of classic Chinese painting, rose to notice. Rejecting orthodox ideas of painting, they embraced a reformative spirit to create highly individual styles, reflecting a scholarly temperament and popular taste at the time. At the center of the Yangzhou school were the "eight eccentrics", who marked their brushwork with brief sketches and renditions of the smaller aspects of nature. An exhibition now on at Shanxi Museum, in provincial capital Taiyuan, surveys the formation of the Yangzhou school and its revolutionary ideas that cast a long influence on Chinese painting. It



shows paintings from the collections of Shanxi Museum and Tianjin Museum. The exhibition ends on March 19.
9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 13 Binhe West Road North Section, Taiyuan, Shanxi province.

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LIFE



As if defying gravity, performers of traditional Chinese dance seem to glide above the court during a halftime show at the NBA game between San Francisco's Golden State Warriors and the Brooklyn Nets on Jan 22. LIU GUANGUAN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Year of the Rabbit marked in US

Events take place nationwide as California declares holiday, **May Zhou** reports in Houston.

As the Year of the Rabbit arrived on Jan 22, a Sunday, people across the United States had ample free time to celebrate the traditional Chinese New Year festival, with one of the highlights being a special tribute by China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang at an NBA game in Washington.

Qin made the video appearance on the eve of Chinese New Year during halftime of the basketball game between the Washington Wizards and the Orlando Magic.

In his celebratory speech, Qin said that the Year of the Rabbit symbolizes kindness, grace and beauty. "Last December, I was here at Capital One Arena as Chinese Ambassador. I spent a wonderful evening watching a fabulous game by Washington Wizards. Today I am glad to join you again in celebrating the Chinese New Year," Qin told the audience.

The halftime break also featured Chinese performances. Children of the Chinese embassy staff appeared as panda mascots to entertain the audience and threw stuffed toy rabbits to cheers from the audience.

Two musicians played the American national anthem on *pipa*, a traditional Chinese instrument, while members of Washington's Chinese community also presented dance performances.

Across the continent, on the West Coast, Chinese performances were also featured during halftime of the NBA game between San Francisco's Golden State Warriors and the Brooklyn Nets.

Aimee Han, 7, would have been one of the performers if not for a last-minute change to attend a dance troupe rehearsal for a big event the next day.

Li Zhang, Aimee's mother, regretted that the conflict left her family unable to observe the most celebrated Chinese holiday.

"However, it's amazing that we are part of the ceremonial moment as the Warriors celebrate Lunar New Year by inviting Chinese performers," Zhang said.

Chinatown in San Francisco displayed spectacular fireworks. Mixed with lion dances, the celebration lasted five hours until midnight, with people running and skating. The tradition dates back to the 1860s and is getting larger every year. The celebration attracted many non-Asians to enjoy the revelry.

In Los Angeles, Disney kicked off its Lunar New Year celebrations on Jan 20 with an assortment of activities that will continue until Feb 15. Park visitors will experience attractions such as Mulan's Lunar New Year procession, a parade featuring characters from the movie *Mulan*, as well as a Chinese dragon puppet, warriors, drummers and dancers.

For the first time in the state's history, Lunar New Year is an official holiday in California. Governor Gavin Newsom signed the bill, that "acknowledges the diversity and cultural significance Asian Americans bring to California", into law in September 2022.

In Seattle, there were security concerns sparked by two deadly mass shootings in California during Lunar New Year, as a large crowd celebrated on Pier 62 on the afternoon of Jan 22.

An organizer of the event, Yoon Kang-O'Higgins, the director of public programs for Friends of the Waterfront, told reporters that they tightened security to make sure the venue was a safe place to celebrate.

"We are committed to creating a space where people do feel safe, that they belong," Kang-O'Higgins told KIRO 7 News in Seattle, "and that these celebrations can still happen in a way that brings joy, that these things can happen, that it won't make us stop doing the work we are doing."

Fireworks were also big in New York, which kicked off celebrations with a host of cultural and artistic events for the Year of the Rabbit.

Thousands of people gathered to watch the Manhattan skyline light up with fireworks at Sara D. Roosevelt Park on Jan 22. The display was part of the 25th New Year Firecracker Ceremony and Cultural Festival.

Guests wore red and gold to the event, and there was also traditional storytelling, performances and snacks; The Shaolin Kung Fu Lion Dancers also attended.

Several other artistic celebrations will take place in New York City to mark the new year.

On Jan 31, the New York Philharmonic will present a Lunar New Year concert featuring violinist Ning Feng in an arrangement of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. There will also be various performances featuring Chinese instruments.

Another New York cultural institution — The Metropolitan Opera — will host a series of Lunar New Year events throughout January.

In a culmination of festivities, thousands are expected to attend the Chinatown Lunar New Year Parade and Festival on Feb 12.

Despite the fact that Lunar New Year is celebrated by a large swath of the world's population in various East Asian countries and by millions of Asian Americans in the US, it is yet to be recognized as a federal holiday.

US Representative Grace Meng, a Democrat from Queens, New York, reintroduced legislation last week to make Lunar New Year the 12th federal holiday.

"My federal holiday bill is about more than just a day off from work or school. It is about educating people on cultural practices and expanding experiences beyond one's individual heritage," Meng said in a statement.

Belinda Robinson in New York, Linda Deng in Seattle, Liu Yinmeng in Los Angeles and Chang Jun in San Francisco contributed to this story.

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Farmers harvest tourism income in rural Xinjiang

URUMQI — As the night closed in, Damingul Kohayip's kitchen became increasingly busy, filled with the sound of chopping, a blazing fire, and boiling water. Outside the kitchen are several traditional Kazakh-style tents where diners eagerly await the delicacies to be served.

The signature dish was a broth made with the two local specialties — freshwater fish from the nearby Ulungur Lake and lamb raised by local herdsmen, says Damingul Kohayip, who runs an agritainment business in Akwutkel village of Fuhai county, Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

Home to the largest natural fishery base in northern Xinjiang, Fuhai in Altay prefecture turned its tradition of winter fishing into a tourism festival featuring ice fishing performances, ice-and-snow sports, and other activities in 2005.





Left: Tourists from Guangdong province on their way to ski in a village in Altay prefecture, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. HU HUHU / XINHUA
Right: A fisherman displays his catch during a winter fishing festival at Ulungur Lake, which attracts many tourists, on Jan 7. LI XIANG / XINHUA

The initiative has brought vitality to the local tourism industry, especially in winter, a traditional tourism off-season. An increasing number of local farmers and herders have turned to careers in the ice-and-snow tourism sector.

Fuhai now has more than 120 farm stays, providing more than 2,000 job opportunities, says Adelbek Abaydulla, head of the county government, adding that the county is pushing for the integrated development of its animal husbandry, farming, and ice-and-snow tourism industries.

Six years into the start of her business, Damingul Kohayip is embracing yet another busy winter. "Since the beginning of December, we have been receiving a greater number of food orders. These days, we even got a bit short-handed," says the 52-year-old woman.

China recently released a long-term guideline on expanding domestic demand, which highlighted boosting the income of its rural residents via measures including development of leisure agriculture, rural tourism, and a homestay economy.

Confident in the prospects of the industry, Towankisu Bulak village in Wensu county, Aksu prefecture, is also managing to ride the wave of ice-and-snow tourism by transforming its swathes of farmland into ice rinks during the down season.

In previous years, Metiniyaz Dawut, a farmer from Towankisu Bulak, did part-time work in winter, hoping to make some money, but it only came in dribs and drabs. Now, he has become a ticket seller at an ice rink and owns a barbecue stall next to it.

"I can make 500 yuan ($74) a day at the barbecue stall, plus the 2,000 yuan a month as a ticket seller," Metiniyaz Dawut says.

Other villages in Aksu also followed suit. The farmland-turned ice rinks alone created more than 3,800 job opportunities across the prefecture.

Though relatively weak in terms of ice-and-snow resources compared with its northern areas, the southern regions of Xinjiang also saw ice-and-snow resorts springing up, providing residents with more convenient and diversified winter recreation.

As ice-and-snow tourism brings more opportunities, winter is no longer a bleak season for Metiniyaz Dawut. "Our village is bustling even on chilly days," he says.

XINHUA

Greece set to welcome return of Chinese visitors

ATHENS — Greece is ready to welcome back Chinese tourists after China optimized its COVID-19 response. From Athens International Airport to the country's hotels and restaurants, China's COVID-19 reopening has boosted hope that it will help strengthen a vital pillar of the Greek economy.

The tourism industry accounts for 25 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Despite numerous major challenges in recent years, the sector showed resilience and, in 2022, Greece generated more than 18 billion euros ($19.5 billion) in tourism-related revenues, passing pre-pandemic record levels, Greek Tourism Minister Vassilis Kikilias tells a recent forum here. He says he is confident that 2023 will be stronger.

"The Chinese market is one of the most important markets for our airport, our city and our country. It was among the top 15 markets for Athens before the pandemic," Ioanna Papadopoulou, AIA's director of communications and marketing, says.

> "We have historical ties with the Chinese people. We are all waiting for them with love from the bottom of our hearts."
>
> **Spiros Bairaktaris,** restaurant owner in Athens

After the relaxation of COVID-19 travel restrictions, the Chinese market will again be one of Greece's fastest developing markets, she adds.

The launch of a direct air link between Athens and Shanghai on Dec 22, in addition to the already existing direct air link between the Greek capital and Beijing, signals a very good start for 2023, she says.

Direct flights between Athens and Beijing commenced in 2017. In just two years, they helped to double the number of Chinese arrivals to AIA, from 108,613 to over 217,600 in 2019, according to the airport.

Chinese travelers will feel welcomed again once they get off their plane. "We are a Chinese-ready airport. We were a Chinese-ready airport before the pandemic. Right now, we have all the pieces in place to welcome the Chinese travelers," Papadopoulou says.

Virtual assistants can help the visitors with information in Chinese, and in AIA's duty-free shops, Chinese customers can use all methods of payment they use back home. Sections of the airport's website are also translated into Chinese.

"We are ready to welcome Chinese travelers back again. We missed them all tremendously during the three years of the pandemic," she adds.

"It is a very good thing that now this market has reopened ... We are ready to welcome them again, as we were welcoming them in 2019," says Evgenios Vassilikos, secretary-general of the Athens, Attica and Argosaronic Hotel Association and second vice-president of the Hellenic Hoteliers Federation.

Spiros Bairaktaris runs a popular restaurant in the center of Athens, which was founded 144 years ago. He recalled that Chinese tourists love Greek food, music and everything in the country.

"We have historical ties with the Chinese people. We are all waiting for them with love from the bottom of our hearts, true love, to host them, to offer our services," Bairaktaris says.

"All the restaurants are eager to see the Chinese return."

XINHUA

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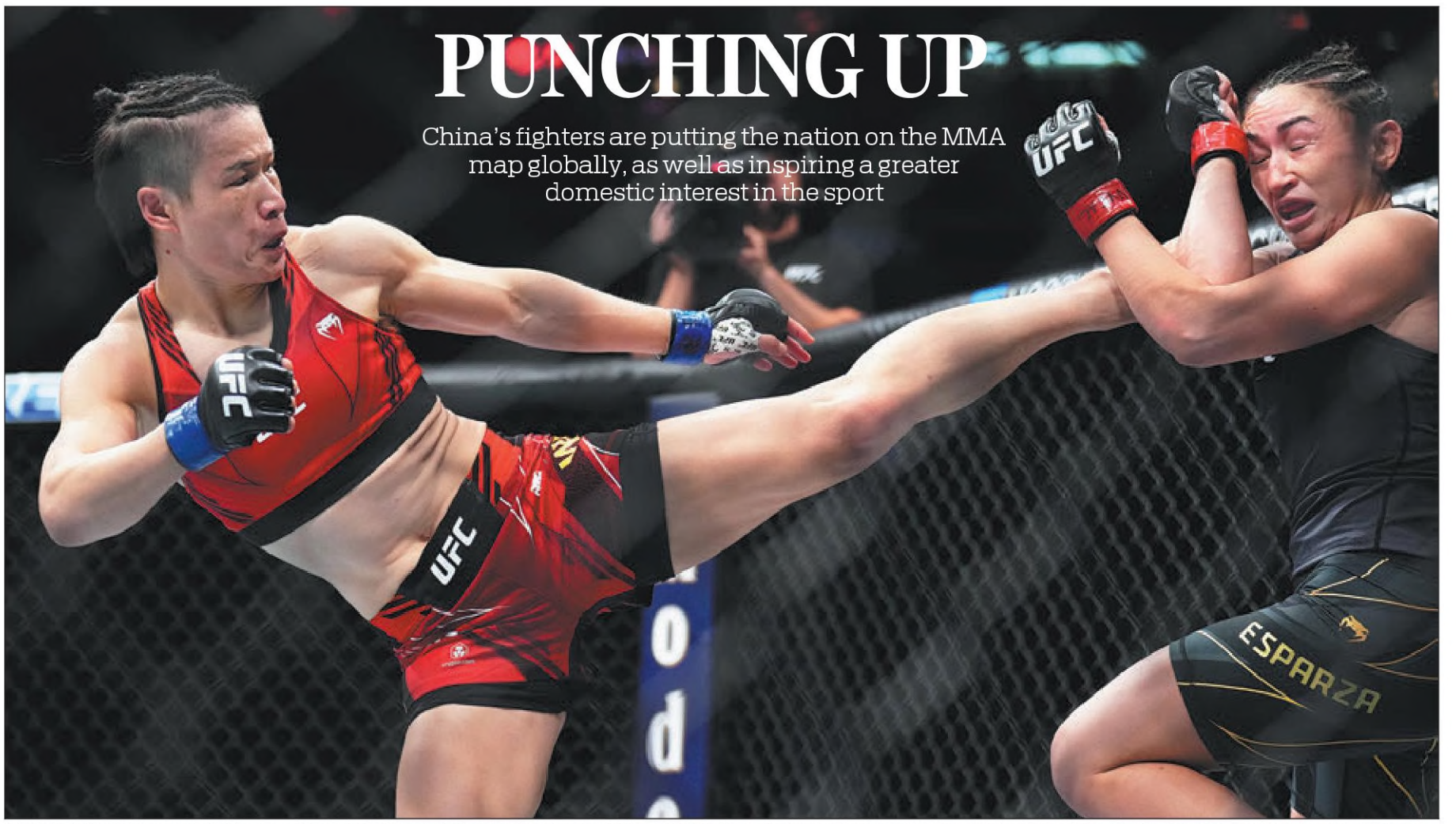
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SPORTS

YEAR-ENDER-MMA

PUNCHING UP

China's fighters are putting the nation on the MMA map globally, as well as inspiring a greater domestic interest in the sport



A high kick from Zhang Weili (left) connects with Carla Esparza in their UFC strawweight title fight at Madison Square Garden in New York on Nov 12. Zhang dethroned the American veteran via a second-round submission to reclaim the belt she first won in August 2019. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

2022 year in Review

By **SUN XIAOCHEN**
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With a new king crowned and the old queen back on the throne, China's mixed martial artists put up a gusty fight on the world stage in 2022, as the sport continues to punch above its weight in the birthplace of kung fu.

Known as the cradle of ancient martial arts, China cemented its rise to prominence in the modern sport of MMA last year, with the men celebrating a major breakthrough in the ring, while the women maintained their world-class prowess.

Fighting in the ONE Championship, a Singapore-based major MMA promotion, Chinese striker Tang Kai made history on Aug 26 after beating former champ Thanh Le of the United States to claim the organization's featherweight belt via a five-round unanimous decision.

By securing his 10th straight win in the Circle, Tang became China's first men's MMA world champion with a major promotion, joining his countrywoman Xiong Jingnan — ONE Championship's reigning strawweight title holder — on the Asia-focused promotion's champion roster.

Hailing from the Sunkin International Fight Club in his native Hunan province, Tang had set his eyes on a long reign upon the featherweight throne right after his successful challenge.

"To bring the championship belt to China, I've lived up to my words before the fight, but I won't stop here," said Tang, a 27-year-old knockout specialist. "My goal is to defend my title many times to extend my dominance as long as possible."

Tang already owns an impeccable 7-0 record since signing with ONE in 2019.

"To make myself a stronger champion, I will work harder on my weaknesses in jujitsu, particularly grappling and brawling," Tang said. "I will also keep sharpening my punches to improve the effectiveness of my striking."

As Tang savored his triumph, Xiong sent him a timely reminder of what it takes to stay on top of a division by going all out on Oct 1 at a live event in Singapore to beat challenger Angela Lee and defend her world title for a record seventh time.

Via a five-round unanimous decision, Xiong, known as "The Panda" in the Circle, ousted Lee to retain her 125-pound (56.7-kilogram) title and lead the Canadian-American fighter 2-1 in bouts fought.



Xiong Jingnan acknowledges the crowd after successfully defending her ONE Championship strawweight belt for a record seventh time against Angela Lee on Oct 1. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

After losing her only fight since joining ONE in 2017 to Lee in a 115-pound (52.2-kg) matchup in October 2019, Xiong, who holds an 18-2 career record, came back strong with three solid wins in the build-up to her third battle against Lee and prevailed with her trademark tenacious attack.

After the hard-fought win, Xiong dedicated her victory to the country, which was celebrating the National Day holiday when she retained the belt.

During her four-year, eight-fight stranglehold on the division, Xiong has proved herself to be the best strawweight fighter the organization has seen, but she isn't satisfied with that.

"It might sound cocky, but I'll keep this belt for a long time," said the 35-year-old Shandong province native.

With no imminent strawweight challengers coming at her way, Xiong is targeting the lower division again.

"I've been thinking about that for a long time," Xiong said of a coveted fourth showdown with Lee in the atomweight class to become a double-division champ.

Now sharing the role to spearhead MMA's rise in China with Xiong, Tang is immensely proud to play his part in popularizing the sport in his home country.

"I think no other sports compare with MMA. It's unique in its appeal," he said. "Hopefully, more people in China will become interested in MMA and start to practice it because of what I did."

Zhang supremacy

Las Vegas-based MMA organization the Ultimate Fighting Championship also saw Chinese fighters shine on its biggest stage in 2022, highlighted by strawweight queen Zhang Weili's return to the top of her division and a string of brave performances by Chinese men in the highly competitive Octagon.



Tang Kai (left) made history on Aug 26, becoming China's first men's major MMA world champion after beating Thanh Le of the United States via unanimous decision to win ONE Championship's featherweight belt. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Zhang, who first wrested the division's belt from Brazilian grappler Jessica Andrade in August 2019, reclaimed the title that she lost to American fighter Rose Namajunas in April 2021. Beating wrestling specialist Carla Esparza via a second-round submission in November at New York's Madison Square Garden, Zhang announced her return to supremacy in the division.

Esparza snatched the strawweight belt from Namajunas via a split decision in a bout in May last year, while Zhang recovered and regrouped for her second title shot.

Zhang's overwhelming win, secured with a rear-naked choke on Esparza, a veteran known for similar styles of wins in the Octagon, sparked a rousing global reaction, including from the likes of boxing legend Mike Tyson and Hollywood action star Sylvester Stallone, who watched the bout live at UFC 281 in New York.

After bringing the belt back home, Zhang is hoping to bring a pay-per-view live UFC event to China, where the hosting of international sporting events is expected to resume after the relaxing of pandemic prevention measures.

"If it is possible, I'd like to defend my title next year in China. It would be a wonderful experience to defend my belt at home for the first time in my career," said the 32-year-old Hebei native.

Despite the challenges in logistics and international travel caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, UFC remains bullish on the future of MMA in the Chinese market, with Zhang's return to the top generating more momentum for the sport.

After witnessing her crowd-pleasing win in New York, UFC president Dana White described Zhang as an anchor for the organization's ambitions in China.

"What you need to have to ignite a market is a badass fighter from that region ... and she is helping to blow the thing up in China," White said at the post-fight news conference.

Since Zhang's first championship win in 2019, the UFC has been making steady inroads into the Chinese market. It opened its second Performance Institute in Shanghai in the same year and has developed a competitive roster of local fighters, such as fifth-ranked strawweight challenger Yan Xiaonan, men's welterweight striker Li Jingliang and bantamweight contender Song Yadong.

Li and Song, although having not won any titles, also delivered inspirational performances of their own in the brutally competitive competition.

Fighting in the UFC's 170-pound (77.1-kg) welterweight class, Li accepted an unfairly-matched bout on short notice against heavier opponent Daniel Rodriguez at UFC 279 in September. A major weigh-in discrepancy with main-event fighter Khamzat Chimaev forced the card to be reset, leaving Li no choice but to face Rodriguez, who was at least 10 pounds heavier than Li on the night, to save the event from collapsing.

Oversized and out-powered by Rodriguez, Li lived up to his Octagon moniker "Leech" throughout three rounds, taking on the American opponent with fierce punches and kicks, winning over fans and pundits, including UFC president White.

It was not enough for the judges, though, who scored the catchweight bout 29-28, 29-28, 28-29 in favor of Rodriguez.

"I thought Li won the fight," White said during the post-event news conference. "The judges were wrong in my opinion. It wasn't even, 'wow! That could have gone either way'. I was shocked when they said split decision."

Li, however, insists he is moving on from the controversy as he bids to punch his way back to title contention.

"The fight is over, I am not hurt and it's settled. It's time to move on, despite the disappointing result," said Li, who made his UFC debut in 2014.

"There are many things that are unfair in the world, yet I will never back down, facing whatever challenges come my way. I will keep marching forward and fighting for home. China Power! Come on!"



China's welterweight fighter Li Jingliang throws a punch at American opponent Daniel Rodriguez in a catchweight bout at UFC 279 in Paradise, Nevada, on Sept 10. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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