



Open-air cinema

Volunteer projectionist finds fulfillment in giving back **IMAGE, PAGE 7**



New Year's chaos

Officers attacked by machete-wielder near Times Square party **WORLD, PAGE 4**

CHINA DAILY

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Leaders exchange New Year greetings, pledge to boost ties

By MO JINGXI
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China and Russia vowed to deepen cooperation and further bilateral relations to deliver more benefits to their peoples as President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin exchanged New Year greetings on Saturday.

In his message, Xi said that in the extraordinary year of 2022, the China-Russia relationship has maintained a momentum of sound development in the face of a rapidly evolving international situation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking of bilateral cooperation in trade and economy in the past year, Xi said that steady progress has been made with new achievements in areas such as energy, investment and connectivity, giving an impetus to the common development of both countries.

Last year, the two nations officially launched the China-Russia Years of Sports Exchanges, which further helped deepen mutual understanding and the traditional friendship between the Chinese and Russian people, Xi said.

Saying that the China-Russia relationship will embrace new opportunities for development in the new year, Xi expressed his willingness to maintain close exchanges with Putin, and guide the two countries to deepen comprehensive strategic coordination and practical cooperation in various fields.

In his message, Putin said the Russia-China comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination had shown a strong momentum of development in the past year and withstood the test of external challenges.

Last year, political dialogue between the two countries had a wide-ranging agenda, bilateral trade volume reached a record high and major cross-border transportation infrastructure projects were completed, he said.

The Russian president said he believes that the two sides will elevate their cooperation to a new and higher level through joint efforts so as to bring benefits to their peoples.

Premier Li Keqiang and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin also exchanged New Year greetings on the same day.

President lauds newspaper's grasp of economic affairs

By XU WEI

President Xi Jinping has called on the Economic Daily to adhere to the right political orientation, innovate its concepts and methods for economic news reporting and make contributions to advancing the high-quality growth of the Chinese economy.

Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the remarks in a congratulatory letter on the 40th anniversary of the founding of the newspaper, a national news outlet devoted to the coverage of domestic and international economic affairs. The president commended the

newspaper for its important roles in publicizing the Party's innovative theories, interpreting economic policies and reporting achievements of the nation's economic growth.

He expressed his hope that the newspaper will make greater contributions to telling the stories of China's economic development in the new era.

Li Shulei, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and head of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, read the letter at a meeting in Beijing on Sunday to celebrate the anniversary. He urged the newspaper to improve its quality reports, boost confidence for growth and promote media integration.

NATION EMBRACES FRESH APPROACH

Modified COVID-19 policies see life returning to pre-pandemic norms

By LI LEI
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More than 12,500 sightseers swarmed to Juzizhou Island, Hunan province, on a recent weekend: five times the number just a month ago. Rural fairs made a comeback in Gansu province after being canceled for much of the year, providing a boon for farmers shopping for gifts and snacks for the upcoming Spring Festival season. Masked youngsters lined up in Shanghai for blockbuster movies, with no worries over the expiration date of their nucleic acid tests.

In fact, the long-lost hustle and bustle have trickled back to some parts of the country ahead of the celebrations for Chinese New Year.

The past 50 days saw central

authorities adjusting the nation's COVID-19 strategies as the Omicron subvariants, which fueled incessant outbreaks nationwide and once resulted in many residential areas being sealed off, have become super contagious, yet far less lethal than their predecessors.

To optimize control measures, health authorities stopped tracing COVID-19 cases and their close contacts, and allowed people to choose if they wished to isolate at home or in government-funded facilities. Testing requirements were cut for everyday scenarios, such as taking the subway, dining at restaurants and traveling out of town. Fitness clubs, karaoke bars and other entertainment venues were allowed to resume business.

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A grand national flag-raising ceremony is held on Sunday at Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, as part of New Year's Day celebrations. ZHANG CHENLIN / XINHUA

Xi rings in 2023 with unity message

Strong resilience, immense potential of Chinese economy highlighted in address

By XU WEI
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President Xi Jinping's New Year address, in which he conveyed messages of unity, solidarity and hard work, emphasized his optimism about the Chinese economy and reiterated the nation's commitment to peace and development, has boosted the people's confidence to build China into a better place with a bright future.

Inside On Saturday, in his address to ring in 2023, Xi underscored unity as the strength for the nation going forward and urged the entire country to build a consensus through communication and consultation.

"When 1.4 billion Chinese work with one heart and one mind, and stand united with a strong will, no task will be impossible and no difficulty insurmountable," he said.

In the past year, China continued

to be the world's second-largest economy with its GDP estimated to exceed 120 trillion yuan (\$17.23 trillion), Xi noted, adding that the nation has secured another bumper harvest despite a global food crisis.

He highlighted the strong resilience, tremendous potential and great vitality of the Chinese economy, saying that the fundamentals sustaining its long-term growth have remained strong. "As long as we stay confident and strive for progress, while maintaining stability, we will realize the goals we have set," he said.

Xi hailed both officials and the general public, particularly medical professionals and community workers, for doing their jobs despite difficulties amid the COVID-19 pandemic. "With extraordinary efforts, we have prevailed over unprecedented difficulties and challenges, and it has not been an easy journey for anyone," he said.

As China's COVID-19 response



People cheer as they watch the flag-raising ceremony on Sunday at Tian'anmen Square, Beijing. ZHANG WUJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

enters a new phase, the president said that everyone is holding on with great fortitude and there will be light at the end of the tunnel even though tough challenges remain. "Let's make an extra effort to pull through, as perseverance and solidarity mean victory," he said.

Xi said he was delighted to see that the Hong Kong Special Admin-

istrative Region had restored order and is about to thrive again. He expressed confidence that the Hong Kong and Macao SARs will see long-term prosperity and stability with the unwavering implementation of the "one country, two systems" principle.

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Diplomat: Openness key to global relations

By ZHANG YUNBI
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China's diplomatic missions will earnestly expand the country's global partnerships based on equality, openness and cooperation in the new year, senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi said.

Inside Wang, who is a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the comment in a signed article in his capacity, for the first time, as director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC Central Committee.

The article was published on Sunday in the first issue this year of the committee's flagship magazine Qiushi.

The Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy "breaks new ground for China's diplomatic theories", and the country's diplomacy successfully advances the building of a community with a shared future for mankind and addresses the yearning of people around the world for peace, development and collaboration, he wrote.

Currently, 150 countries and 32 international organizations are part of the big family of the Belt and Road Initiative, according to the article. In terms of advancing an open world economy in the new year, China will further advance the co-building of the Belt and Road, Wang said.

China will "provide more convenience for the exchange of visits with the outside world", and "secure a stable and well-functioned production chain and supply chain", he wrote.

Su Xiaohui, an associate research fellow at the China Institute of International Studies, noted that China's great sense of duty as a major country is also a feature of its major country diplomacy.

"China has never ignored the challenges that developing countries in the world are facing, and seeks more efforts to guard their legitimate rights and interests, as well as wants more opportunities for developing nations to spur their growth," she said.

As part of the nation's new year resolution for diplomacy, Chinese diplomats will be dedicated to head-of-state diplomacy and shape external conditions for realizing high-quality development, according to Wang.

China will deepen strategic mutual trust and mutually beneficial collaboration with Russia, and it will discuss with the United States about the guiding principles of their relations and make further fine-tuning to ensure the relations go in the right path, he noted.

"Over the past year, we have relentlessly explored the right way for China and the US — two major countries — to get along with each other," he wrote.

Beijing will work for closer high-level exchanges and strategic communication with Europe, and push for the steady development of China-Europe relations, he said.

"As two major forces champion world peace and two major markets promote common growth, the development of China-Europe relations matters to the stability of the global landscape and the prosperity of the Eurasian continent," he noted.

China will deepen its friendship, mutual trust and convergence of interests with neighboring countries while reinforcing unity and collaboration with other developing countries and defending their rights and interests, he added.

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CHINA

Xi hails Antigua and Barbuda ties

Nations congratulate each other on 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations

By MO JINGXI
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President Xi Jinping said on Sunday that he highly values developing China's relations with Antigua and Barbuda, and will work with its Governor-General Rodney Williams to jointly create a better future for bilateral ties.

Xi made the remark as he exchanged congratulatory messages with Williams on the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between

the two countries.

Xi said that Antigua and Barbuda is an important partner of China in the Caribbean region.

Since the two countries established diplomatic relations, they have forged ahead smoothly with deepened mutual political trust, fruitful practical cooperation and growing friendship between the two peoples, he said.

The two countries have helped and supported each other in overcoming difficulties since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic,

writing a new chapter of their friendly relations, he added.

Xi said that he is ready to work with Williams to take the 40th anniversary as a new starting point to deepen bilateral cooperation in various fields and promote the high-quality development of the Belt and Road.

Williams said the 40th anniversary is a significant milestone of the increasingly closer bilateral relationship between the two countries. Antigua and Barbuda will continue to stay committed to maintaining and enhancing the existing good relations with China, he added.

On the same day, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang also exchanged congratulatory messages on the 40th anniversary with Gaston Browne, Antigua and Barbuda's prime minister.

South Africa

In another development, Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, congratulated Cyril Ramaphosa on Saturday on the latter's re-election as president of the African National Congress, South Africa's ruling party.

In his congratulatory message, Xi said he was glad to learn of Ramaphosa's re-election as president of the ANC and he wished Ramaphosa new and greater success.

Xi said the CPC and the ANC enjoy a profound traditional friend-

ship and have achieved fruitful results in bilateral exchanges and cooperation. This has played an important role in promoting the in-depth development of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries, he said.

Xi expressed his willingness to work with Ramaphosa to lead the relationship between the two parties and the two countries to a higher level, and join hands to build a China-Africa community with a shared future in the new era and a community with a shared future for mankind.

Ramaphosa was re-elected to lead the party for a second term of five years during the 55th national conference of the ANC last month.

Address:
Commitment to peace and development reaffirmed

From page 1

The president said that people on both sides of the Taiwan Straits are members of one and the same family, and expressed hope that compatriots on both sides of the Straits will work together with a unity of purpose to jointly foster the lasting prosperity of the Chinese nation.

Xi paid rich tribute to the late Chinese leader Jiang Zemin, who passed away on Nov 30 at the age of 96. He praised Jiang's "towering achievements and noble demeanor", and pledged to carry forward Jiang's great legacy. "We will honor his last wishes and advance the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era," Xi said.

The president reaffirmed China's commitment to peace and development and standing firmly on the right side of history and on the side of human civilization and progress. The nation will work hard to contribute China's wisdom and solutions to the cause of peace and development for all humanity, he said.

Peng Zhiyong, head of the intensive care unit at Zhongnan Hospital of Wuhan University, said Xi's warm remarks have further motivated medical workers as the nation fights a surge in COVID-19 infections. "We must hold the line (against COVID-19) to protect people's health and lives. Perseverance means victory, and solidarity is the way to victory," he said.

Deng Zhuting, president of the London Chinatown Chinese Association in the United Kingdom, said he believes the vitality of China's socio-economic growth will be further unleashed as the nation optimizes its COVID-19 policies. He expressed his belief that China will continue to put its economy on the track of high-quality development and drive regional and global growth.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

Briefly

NE China wind power project switched on

A major onshore wind power project in Northeast China's Liaoning province was connected to the State Grid and put into operation on Saturday. The 400,000-kilowatt project can provide 1.13 billion kilowatt hours of clean electricity every year, which can satisfy a year's power demand for nearly 600,000 households. Annually, the project will reduce standard coal use by 345,000 metric tons and carbon dioxide emissions by 912,000 tons, said the northeast branch of the State Power Investment Corporation, the project's investor and builder. With a gross investment of over 2.2 billion yuan (\$316 million), the project has 80 wind turbines, each with a capacity of 5 megawatts, in addition to a 220-kilovolt booster station. It is the first major new-energy project completed by the corporation in Liaoning during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-25). The company plans to build more new-energy bases in Liaoning and neighboring Inner Mongolia, and increase its installed capacity of clean energy to 6 million kilowatts before the end of the 14th Five-Year Plan.

Beijing parks launch holiday ice-snow events

More than 20 parks in Beijing, including the Summer Palace, Beihai Park and the Olympic Forest Park, have launched activities for the ice and snow season, according to the municipal forestry and parks bureau on Saturday. The city's parks have various venues — such as natural ice rinks and artificial snow areas — available for visitors. "Rivers, lakes and squares in some parks are being used for ice and snow activities," said Peng Qiang, head of the bureau's park administration office. "There are winter activities such as sledding, slides and ice skating available," she added. Beijing's ice and snow season is expected to last until mid-February.

XINHUA

Interpretation safeguards HK national security

By OASIS HU
and LI BINGCUN in Hong Kong

Prominent figures from Hong Kong's political and legal circles have expressed their support for the recent interpretation of the national security law for Hong Kong by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, saying that the clarification is significant for safeguarding national security in the special administrative region and will help the city adjudicate national security cases more impartially in the future.

On Friday, the NPCSC adopted an interpretation of articles 14 and 47 of the national security law, which clarifies the duties of the Committee for Safeguarding Security of the Hong Kong SAR and the chief executive, as well as the legal basis for handling new situations in regard to safeguarding national security in Hong Kong.

The interpretation came in response to a request by Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu for clarification on whether overseas lawyers who are not qualified to generally practice in the SAR can take part in national security cases.

A spokesman of the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in the HKSAR said the NPCSC's interpretation demonstrated the central government's firm determination to administer the HKSAR in accordance with the law and further consolidated the SAR's constitutional order.

In its response, the city's judiciary said that it respects the lawful exercise of power by the NPCSC to make the interpretations. All lawmakers of the seventh Hong Kong Legislative Council issued a joint declaration welcoming the move.

Andrew Leung Kwan-yuen, president of LegCo, said the NPCSC's clear explanation dispels unnecessary concerns about the city's legal system, and creates a more favorable business and investment environment for Hong Kong.

Tam Yiu-chung, a Hong Kong member of the NPCSC, said the interpretation will help prevent potential national security risks and alleviate concerns about foreign intervention in Hong Kong affairs. It is in the interests of the city and the nation, he added.

Victor Dawes, chairman of the Hong Kong Bar Association, believes that from the content of the interpretation, the NPCSC has adopted a method that best upholds the principle of "one country, two systems" to deal with the issue.

Non-official members of the city's Executive Council, an organ that assists the chief executive in policy-making, said they agreed with the complete necessity and legality of the NPCSC interpretation, adding that the move is conducive to further improving the legal system and enforcement mechanisms for safeguarding the national security of the HKSAR.

Political parties, including the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions and the Liberal Party, also welcomed the interpretation.

Contact the writers at bingcun@chinadailyhk.com

Center of attention



Tourists take in a traditional street performance in Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, on Saturday. After the recent adjustment in COVID-19 restrictions across the country, many Chinese have set out to travel during the New Year holiday. ZOU JINGYI / XINHUA

Opera gala celebrates tradition and cultural diversity

By LIN QI
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An evening gala of classical Chinese opera was aired on State broadcaster China Central Television on Sunday, in celebration of the New Year and promoting the richness of Chinese culture and the anticipation of national progress for the year ahead.

A diverse program was broadcast upholding the long-standing tradition of performing operas nationwide as an important part of celebrations at ceremonies and festivals, especially grand occasions such as New Year and Spring Festival.

Chinese opera, as a mosaic of music, dancing, acrobatic stunts and costume art, exemplifies the depth and diversity of Chinese arts.

It is sung in different local dialects, and has been integrated with folk art and cultures that vary from region to region. In the past, it appealed to both the ruling class and those at the grassroots.

Leading opera artists from across the country gathered in Beijing to stage dozens of performances at the gala.

The gala opened with the tale of Mu Guiying, a story revisited many times by folk arts about

how a girl became a general to protect her people from invaders during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127).

The performance was sung in the styles of Peking Opera, Hebei Bangzi (wood clapper), popular in Hebei province, and Yuju Opera, originating in Henan province.

The gala not only featured well-known operatic genres such as Peking Opera, but also promoted those of minor popularity, which entertain people living in underdeveloped regions, such as Pingxian Opera in Qinghai province and Caidiao Opera from the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous

region, which both evolved from folk singing and dancing.

Performers reenacted the folk tales around historic figures that are regularly staged across the country. This included a piece from *The Legend of White Snake*, a Cantonese opera film released in 2021 that created a stir for giving the genre and the well-known plot an innovative look.

Newly created pieces were also staged to hail luminaries who have contributed to the country and its people over the past century, for example Fan Jinshi, the preeminent archaeologist devoted to the preservation of Dunhuang grottoes in Gansu province.

Bus drivers pull out all stops to carry COVID patients

By LI WENFANG
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Bus drivers are being trained to drive ambulances in some areas across the country as medical emergency calls surge due to the fast progression of COVID-19 infections.

In the city of Wuxi in East China's Jiangsu province, daily medical emergency calls had more than doubled to an average of 2,700 calls with around 480 ambulance trips dispatched per day, or 1.7 times the normal frequency last week, according to Xu Lipeng, an official with the city's emergency medical center, reported by Wuxi Daily.

The initial group of 10 of the city's bus drivers have joined the emergency medical center after completing their training.

In Ningbo, Zhejiang province, 290 drivers and maintenance workers for the city's public transport group are pitching in to help with emergency medical transport.

They have been trained in emergency medical workflow and the use of equipment onboard ambulances.

A total of 91 bus drivers in Zhejiang capital Hangzhou had also been providing emergency medical assistance by Dec 27, with each driver taking up to 20 calls and covering 200 to 300 kilometers per day on average, according to Hangzhou's public transport group.

Their training has covered cardiopulmonary resuscitation and the use of protective equipment and stretchers.

Pan Yimin, one of the drivers, carried a wheelchair-bound 90-year-old patient from a fifth-floor apartment with his partners. The building had no elevator and the staircases were too narrow for a stretcher.

"I cleared the first-aid examination and take great care in emergencies, so that patients can reach hospitals rapidly and safely," Pan said.



Chaoyang district's emergency medical center bustles with activity on Thursday, responding to calls from the public. The center in Beijing has increased the number of duty staff to deal with calls in the wake of a spike in COVID-19 infections. WANG FEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Other drivers providing much-needed assistance in Hangzhou, such as bus driver Xue Hongqun, have even assisted doctors in carrying out cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

On his busiest day so far in providing emergency transport in Hangzhou, bus driver Wu Jianguo made 10 trips.

"We got the patients to the hospital, transferred them to the doctors

and nurses and went straight on to the next place. There was almost no pause in between," he said.

Wu has also adjusted his driving style. "An ambulance is different from a bus. It is not restricted by the route, direction, speed or traffic lights as long as safety is ensured," he said.

In Tianjin, over 100 bus drivers have been trained to join the municipality's ambulance fleet.

COVER

Changes: China gears up for the future

From page 1

However, for Liu Han, a 21-year-old who had not yet been infected with COVID-19, much was still at stake if he fell ill. The senior at Beijing International Studies University had never been closer to realizing his dream of becoming a simultaneous interpreter.

Liu and his teachers believed that he stood a good chance of passing the annual National Graduate Entrance Exam and being admitted to a top university in Beijing to study Chinese-English-Spanish interpretation.

The written part of the exam took place on Dec 25 and 26, and only those who excelled can earn a spot for a second-round test at their dream schools in March or April.

Infected students on campus mostly displayed mild symptoms, such as a high temperature, cough, fatigue and loss of smell and taste, and they were not barred from sitting the exam as an "infected only" classroom was arranged for them.

But still, Liu said he felt that it was imperative to take extra precautions against the virus until after the exam.

He reduced his visits to the campus shower room to once every two days. He fetched his own food from the canteen, and disinfected himself from head to toe after entering the dorm.

"The exam is just a week away, and all I need is to stay fit," he said in the run-up to the big event, adding that being infected just ahead of the crucial exam would be a psychological disaster.

Parcel pileup

Delivery drivers have been crisscrossing Beijing's alleys late into the night on electric rickshaws as they race to clear a backlog of parcels in the wake of the "Double 12" e-shopping festival.

The event — which can last for weeks from about Dec 12 — is among the country's most testing moments for the logistics industry as goods worth hundreds of billions of yuan funnel through courier companies to the doorsteps of binge-buying households.

However, recent outbreaks have made this past Double 12 peak season even more trying for couriers.

Early in November, health authorities lifted a restriction on buying fever, cold and anti-inflammatory drugs as part of a broader effort to encourage COVID-19 patients to wait out discomfort at home and avoid busy hospitals.

As a result, online orders for such medications soared, as well as those for antigen test kits, N95 masks and other epidemic-themed products.

On top of that, large numbers of courier workers fell ill and asked for sick leave.

Yao Hongxu, deputy general manager of the Beijing division of SF Express, said that Omicron knocked out half of his 18,000-strong team at the worst time. The number only bounced back recently as many workers recovered and returned to their posts.



To replenish the workforce, parcel companies in Beijing raced to "borrow" delivery workers from regions less affected by the virus. Some shifted employees from non-delivery work to the front line and upgraded cloth masks to N95 to prevent further illness among workers. Drivers were also encouraged to contact clients to see if parcels could be delivered at night.

"I deliver more than 100 parcels a day," said Xu Zhenglong, who was "borrowed" from Anhui province to help ease the parcel pileup in the capital. The father of two had been staying at a budget hotel with other borrowed colleagues.

After days of hard work, the parcel mountain had been reduced to a flat plain, he said.

Chen Shiju, general manager of Xinkaiyuan, a cold-chain logistics company in Zhengzhou, Henan province, had a team of 43 workers, but less than 10 were still working.

Half of those left, including himself, had tested positive for COVID-19 but chose to stay.

"The infections have created a temporary shortage of workers, which has exerted huge pressure on our company," Chen said. "Hopefully, things will be sorted out when the workers who fell sick earliest recover and return to work."

No more control tasks

For the last three years, Bian Siqian has been accustomed to being assigned "epidemic prevention tasks" in addition to her duties as a pediatrician at Xi'an Fourth Hospital in Shaanxi province, such as collecting samples at COVID-19 testing booths.

In November, Bian's employer sent her and 53 colleagues — all doctors and nurses — to staff a makeshift isolation facility in an eastern suburb amid an uptick in local cases.



From top: Workers install decorative lights for a key movie and television production base being built in Chongqing last month after construction resumed. HUANG WEI / XINHUA A courier scans QR codes on parcels before delivering them in Beijing last month. ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY A worker disinfects aisles and seats at a cinema in Beijing last month. FU DING / FOR CHINA DAILY

More than 7,000 people had been quarantined there since it opened. "At first, there were too many patients and too few staff members, so lunch seldom arrived on time," Bian said.

Then, after centralized isolation was made voluntary early last month, the number of residents started to fall and finally stabilized at 1,000.

"Those who remain are reluctant

to leave because food, drugs and tests are all readily available here," the doctor said.

When positive cases were scarce, authorities had mixed samples of up to 10 people to speed up mass testing and reduce costs. However, the spike in infections meant a greater number of mixed samples returned positive, so single-sample tests were needed to pinpoint the patient. That caused delays in uploading test results.

As a result, Xi'an and many other cities nationwide dropped the test requirement for visiting hospitals — the few remaining places sticking to stringent test demands.

Bian hasn't yet been infected, but she said that half the medical workers she knows have, and those with mild symptoms had remained at work to help deal with a surge of patients at hospitals.

The silver lining? Many of the pandemic control tasks tossed at her will soon be history, though it may take some time.

"In the past year, I have spent little time as a pediatrician because of epidemic control tasks. I have plans for exams in my field of study if more time is available in the near future," she said.

Wang Mengni, a midwife in Xi'an, said there used to be eight doctors in her department, but now only four are left.

"Some doctors are so sick that they had to ask for sick leave, and that means those still at their posts have to work longer hours," Wang said.

Eager to go offline

For the better part of last year, Zhang Hang had given his lectures via a microphone and camera.

Without immediate feedback, as is the case with in-person classes, he felt at a loss to know if his students were keeping up with him.

"Though I don't have to commute to school, I am more prone to be gripped by a sense of total exhaustion after class," said Zhang, a college teacher and freelance interpreter in Beijing. The 29-year-old said the Omicron-fueled outbreaks had disrupted his teaching career.

Students missed on-campus life for the entire spring semester last year, and a spike in cases this winter has toppled his teaching plans.

In November, colleges in many places, including Beijing and Guangzhou, Guangdong province, allowed students to head home more than a month ahead of the winter break to avoid on-campus outbreaks. Students are expected to attend the rest of the classes online and take exams virtually.

There are concerns about cheating. Examinees must turn on their cameras and install special software that can detect if they switch webpage.

"Shifting teaching online is a bumpy adaptation process for all, but even more so for older teachers," Zhang said.

To facilitate the shift, Zhang's school has reimbursed the teachers for the cost of the microphones, cameras, handwriting devices and other gadgets they had to buy. It even rolled out videos featuring popular online lectures in hopes camera-shy colleagues could emulate them.

With the frequent adjustments to COVID rules lately, Zhang was not sure if such skills would be still useful.

"I crave going back to the classroom, offline," he said.

Du Bo, who works for a United States futures company in Beijing, is now expecting to meet his boss, and his boss's bosses in Hong Kong, Singapore and the US, in person.

In the past few years, financial sector workers have become used to doing everything from research to meeting clients over Zoom-powered sessions. They have largely stopped hopping around on business trips among financial hubs such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou and Shenzhen in Guangdong province, which were all pounded by frequent outbreaks last year. Also, overseas trips stopped.

"For many of us, working at China-based foreign companies, meeting our foreign bosses in person has been a luxury over the past few years," Du said.

In the early days of the pandemic, China kept domestic cases to near zero and stuck to stringent isolation policies for inbound visitors to prevent the virus from being imported.

First, visitors needed to go through 14 days of centralized quarantine and seven days of home observation, known as "14+7". In June, it was reduced to "7+3" and in November "5+3". On Dec 26, it was announced that no more quarantine will be needed for inbound travelers starting Jan 8.

"When the quarantine-free policy is unveiled, I will travel more often to Hong Kong and Singapore for in-person meetings," he said.

Phone plant rings correct COVID response

By LI LEI in Beijing and SHI BAOYIN in Zhengzhou

Yan Huabing is well-aware of the Herculean task involved in building the world's largest iPhone plant from scratch. However, the 41-year-old said that struggle has been eclipsed by his work in the past three years: halting the spread of COVID-19 at the Foxconn plant in Zhengzhou, Henan province, where about 70 percent of the world's iPhones are made.

"It felt like a real battle," said Yan, who oversees security and logistics at the plant. "I would rather build the factory from scratch again than going through the epidemic anew."

In 2010, a deal worth \$12 million was finalized to create the factory. Betting on the growing opportunities in China's inland areas, Yan left his job at the Foxconn plant in Shenzhen — a coastal megacity in Guangdong province that borders Hong Kong — and moved north.

However, what Yan saw at the

plant's Zhengzhou site stunned him: there were no workshop buildings, no dormitories, no canteens, and none of the hustle and bustle of a major metropolitan area. Yan had worked at the Shenzhen plant for six years after graduating from college, and everything he had become accustomed to was missing in the central city of 12.7 million people. As far as the eye could see, the area was just a vast wilderness of jujube trees.

However, his gamble quickly paid off. In a little more than a month, a new factory had been erected in the wooded area and had started churning out electronic devices. The steady influx of capital and human resources prompted the local government to establish the Zhengzhou Airport Economic Zone in the plant's neighborhood to aid the local growth engine.

More buildings sprang up and more assembly lines were installed, fueling a decade-long expansion that earned Zhengzhou — previously known as a busy transportation hub



Yan Huabing Li Peilong

where major railways converged — the new title of "iPhone city". During peak production seasons, more than 300,000 employees worked on the assembly lines.

As time progressed, Yan was promoted to a senior management position, overseeing the workers' accommodations.

"I am a witness of the 'Zhengzhou speed'," he said, referring to the city's economic momentum and efficiency.

Then came the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019. Many workers who had left for

Spring Festival reunions were stranded at home because of travel restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the deadly disease.

To ensure smooth production, the management offered cash incentives in February 2021 to entice employees to work in what was described as a "closed-loop environment," where they need to stay within the factory compound.

To do that, employees who rented or owned apartments nearby had to move into dormitories within the factory. Yan was one of them: for months, he could only talk to his wife and teenage son and daughter via video calls. He said he dreamed of the taste of the dumplings his wife often made for him.

The control measures loosened and tightened in tandem with the epidemic situation in Zhengzhou, but they generally worked well to ensure smooth production while the trade and manufacturing sectors in many places worldwide were

overwhelmed by the virus.

However, the greater contagiousness of the Omicron subvariants, which fueled outbreaks nationwide last year, also rendered the closed-loop strategy less effective. An outbreak in late October led to an exodus of workers and dealt a blow to Foxconn's production.

Moreover, given the milder nature of the dominant strains of the virus across the country, the central authorities began modifying the COVID-19 strategies and cut many testing and isolation requirements.

Despite the contagious virus, Yan said that the joint efforts of the local government and the company allowed many Foxconn workers to recover and return to their posts, making the impact of the virus on production manageable.

"I haven't visited my parents in rural Shandong province for Spring Festival since the onset of the epidemic," he said.

His parents, who are in their late 60s and have preexisting conditions, tested positive for COVID-19 recently, which has worried Yan as he knows that outbreaks could recur in some rural areas which are

in need of more health resources.

"My biggest wish this year is to travel home and spend the holiday with them, and I will bring some masks and hand sanitizers for them," Yan said.

Li Peilong, 29, is a relative newcomer to the plant. He has been working in the human resources department since June 2021. For him, the last six months were all about COVID-19 as he and his colleagues were tasked with purchasing and transporting epidemic-themed materials for the whole factory.

"It was a huge task, given the number of people at the factory, as well as the fact that many colleagues fell ill and asked for sick leave," said Li, a native of Xinmi, a county-level city near Zhengzhou.

His new year wish is to go home for a family reunion in January, and then enjoy a dinner party with the colleagues he worked alongside amid the epidemic.

"I am eagerly looking forward to that day," he said.

Qi Xin contributed to this story.

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WORLD

Xi speech hailed for illuminating future

President's New Year address shows depth of support for stability: experts

By CHEN WEIHUA in Brussels, YANG HAN in Hong Kong and REN QI in Moscow

Chinese President Xi Jinping extended New Year greetings in an address delivered in Beijing on Saturday to ring in 2023. The New Year speech shows China's commitment to advancing global peace and stability, declaring a promising vision for the future and the leading role China will play in human development, overseas experts say.

Carlos Martínez, a British commentator and co-editor of Friends of Socialist China, said that Xi, in the address based on China's achievements including the country's extraordinary efforts to suppress COVID-19, highlighted in particular China's total commitment to regional and global peace and stability.

"The historical record testifies to this commitment: China resolutely upholds the principles of peaceful coexistence; it consistently opposes the use of unilateral sanctions; it never interferes in the political affairs of other countries; and it imposes its hegemony on nobody," he said.

Xi reiterated this profoundly humanistic vision, wishing peace and prosperity for the peoples of all countries, he said.

Lee Chang-ho, chairman of the Korea-China Exchange Promotion Committee, said that Xi's address declared the vision for the future and the leading role that China will play in human development.

"As the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the world paradigm, there are many difficulties but I was able to see the warm heart from Xi's speech that China puts the benefit and happiness of the people first. It puts an emphasis on national stability and cherishing the people," he said.

Through his speech, the Chinese people, as well as those who are friendly to China, will once again feel the potential of China's impact on world history and the hope to participate in China's development, Lee said.

The speech also indicated that China always opens the door to dialogue and showed that China is willing to make contributions to human development, Lee said.

'Putting people first'

Echoing Lee, Oleg Deripaska, a Russian industrialist, highlighted how Xi said "we have put the people first and put life first all along" as a consistent message since the arrival of COVID-19.

"Further implementation of the newly announced anti-COVID adjustment measures by China will help restore supply chains and eliminate logistics bottlenecks on the Sino-Russian borders thus easing trade," he said.

Deripaska noted that Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin exchanged New Year greetings on the last day of 2022. Deripaska said he looked forward to the two countries continuing to develop their

cooperation on logistics and infrastructure networks.

Lim Tai Wei, an adjunct senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, said that in his speech, Xi also highlighted the successful conclusion of the 20th National Congress of the CPC.

In emphasizing how dreams become reality, President Xi appears to have hinted at the future unfolding of China's destiny, Lim said, adding that Xi is putting in efforts to mobilize the hearts and minds of the Chinese people to achieve major projects advancing the country's development.

Betty Yuan, an adviser to Chinese for Peaceful Unification-Northern California, said that Xi's speech is inspiring especially with his encouragement for people to "build consensus through communication and consultation". "We overseas Chinese are in support of President Xi to work with one heart and stand in unity. We agree that we can draw strength from unity."

Martinez said that undoubtedly the Chinese people will make tremendous progress in 2023 toward common prosperity, socialist modernization, and the building of a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful.

Lia Zhu in San Francisco and Zhao Ruian in Beijing contributed to this story.

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3 NYPD officers attacked near New Year's Eve celebration

By HENG WEILI in New York
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The New Year's Eve revelry in the US was interrupted by violence in New York City and elsewhere.

A young man wielding a machete attacked three police officers on Saturday near the celebration in New York City's Times Square, authorities said, striking two of them in the head before an NYPD officer shot the man in the shoulder.

The attack happened shortly after 10 pm, about eight blocks from the square in Midtown Manhattan, just outside of the area where revelers are screened for weapons.

"Unprovoked, a 19-year-old male approached an officer and attempted to strike him over the head with a machete," said New York Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell. "The male then struck two additional officers in the head with the machete."

The three officers were taken to Bellevue Hospital, one with a fractured skull and another with a bad cut, and were expected to recover. The injuries to the third officer were not disclosed.

The New York Post identified the suspect as Trevor Bickford, 19, who was on an FBI watchlist, citing multiple law enforcement sources Sunday.

One of the officers shot Bickford in the shoulder after he attacked them on Eighth Avenue between 51st and 52nd streets, the sources said. The wounded suspect also was taken to Bellevue Hospital. Charges were pending against him on Sunday morning, police said.

Bickford, from Wells, Maine, is believed to have become radicalized in recent years and was on the FBI's terrorism "Guardian Watchlist"; he had planned to travel to Afghanistan

to fight alongside Islamic militants, sources told the Post.

He traveled to New York alone on an Amtrak train and packed camping gear, a diary, and a last will and testament, the sources told the Post.

The attack and sound of a gunshot briefly sent some in the crowd running.

The NYPD mounts a massive security operation every year to keep the New Year's Eve crowd safe. Thousands of officers are sent to the area, including many new recruits.

One of the injured officers had just graduated from the police academy on Friday, New York Mayor Eric Adams said.

A man was stabbed in the neck with scissors by another man a block from Times Square on Saturday, police and witnesses said.

The stabbing occurred around 8:45 pm when a fight broke out between the two on West 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue, near Bryant Park, police said, according to the Post.

"A guy with a book bag got knocked out. He was digging through his book bag. The guy with the bag was holding scissors. He pulled 2-inch scissors out of his bag. The guy who hit him knocked the scissors out of his hand and jabbed him in the neck three times," said a visitor from San Diego, who gave only his first name, Brandon, the Post reported.

"He was bleeding pretty bad in his neck. He did damage when he stabbed him with the scissors," the witness said.

"I was staring at the ball and I saw a big commotion and I saw someone do this like three times to someone's neck," said a witness named Gabriel, making a stabbing gesture, the Post reported. "I saw a bunch of blood so I'm assuming he got stabbed.

Everybody was yelling, 'Yo, it's not worth it!'"

"When people ask me how the ball dropped, I'll tell them that story. ... I will say I saw some guy get stabbed in the neck in New York City. Very typical New York City," Bailey, girlfriend of Brandon, told the Post. "I probably won't see the ball drop again."

In Ocala, Florida, two people were killed and four others injured in a shooting early Sunday, authorities said. Gunfire broke out around 4:30 am in an area where a crowd of about 100 people were gathered, police said in a news release.

In Mobile, Alabama, one person was killed and nine hurt in a shooting a few blocks away from where thousands were in the streets for a New Year's Eve party, police said.

The shooting happened a few blocks from the main stage for the Moon Pie Over Mobile festival. The shooter and the person killed appeared to know each other, Mobile Police Chief Paul Prine told reporters near the scene.

In Philadelphia, nine people were shot, including two teenagers, over the weekend, fox29.com reported.

In Chicago, an extra 1,300 police officers were deployed across the city on New Year's Eve, many of them focusing on downtown festivities and the fireworks display at Navy Pier, officials announced Friday, the Chicago Sun-Times reported.

Over the last three years, at least five people were killed and 25 shot in the US' third-largest city in the 12-hour stretch between late New Year's Eve and early New Year's Day, according to police records, the Sun-Times reported.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Spirit of generosity



Buddhist monks receive alms during a ceremony for New Year at Wat Phra Dhammakaya temple in Pathum Thani, Thailand, on Sunday. About 3,000 monks took part in the ceremony, which resumed at the temple after pandemic curbs. SIRACHAI ARUNRUGSTICHAI / GETTY IMAGES

New foreign minister stresses peace focus

By ZHAO HUANXIN in Washington
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Qin Gang, China's ambassador to the United States and newly named foreign minister, said China is committed to its foreign policy goals of upholding world peace and promoting common development while remaining dedicated to building a community with a shared future for mankind.

The Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress, China's top legislature, adopted a decision on Friday to remove Wang Yi from the post of foreign minister and appoint Qin to the position. Wang has been appointed director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China Central Committee.

Wang, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, had served as foreign minister since 2013. He is also a State Councilor.

Qin, 56, becomes the third Chinese ambassador to the US to lead the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, following Li Zhaoxing and Yang Jiechi, who assumed the ambassadorial post in Washington in 1998 and 2001, respectively.

In his first comments as foreign minister, Qin noted that China's diplomacy is committed to peace, development, cooperation, and delivering mutual benefits, and will press for a new model of international relations based on mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation.

In solving challenges common to all of mankind, China's diplomacy will offer "Chinese wisdom, Chinese initiatives, and Chinese strength," Qin said in a statement posted on the ministry's website.

Qin began serving as China's 11th

ambassador to the US in July last year, vowing to "build bridges of communication and cooperation with all sectors of the United States" and endeavor to bring China-US relations back on track.

He has said that misunderstandings have dire consequences on bilateral relations, which have plummeted to the lowest level in decades.

In a speech at the Asia Society Texas Center in June, Qin noted that the core message of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's China policy speech in May is that the US will harness its national strengths to conduct comprehensive and intense strategic competition with China.

The speech shows the US' serious misunderstanding and misjudgment of the time and of China, and highlights the two countries' differences on some major issues.

Now as China's foreign minister, Qin is expected to meet with Blinken during his China visit, which will take place early this year.

Misperception debunked

In a talk in early December, the ambassador again said that "out of grave strategic misperception and misjudgment," some people see China as "the most serious competitor" and "the most consequential long-term geopolitical challenge", and outcompeting China has become the purpose of all the China policies of the US.

Consequently, the notion of national security has been overstretched, economic and trade issues have become politicized and weaponized, export controls, import restrictions, and harsher investment reviews have been imposed, as well as measures in tech decoupling, sectoral regulation and industrial subsidies, Qin said.

"We should not let national security stand in the way of economic development and the improvement of people's lives in both countries," he said.

Qin has traveled extensively, including a trip to the US heartland states of Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota and visits to the Port of Boston, the Detroit auto show and even to a suburban farm in St. Louis, Missouri.

He once told the US business community: "I would love to talk to you, and be a good listener and helper to you so that we can uphold and promote the common interests of China and the US."

The US-China Business Council, which represents more than 280 US companies doing business with China, recognized Qin as a Distinguished Honoree for his efforts over the past year and a half to stabilize relations. "I believe none of us wants to see global warming. But all of us want to see a warming of China-US cooperation," Qin said at the USCBC 2022 Gala on Dec 6, to applause in the packed hall.

As is widely expected, dealing with China-US relations, the most important bilateral relationship in the world, will remain a priority for the new foreign minister.

Qin seems to have taken a pragmatic attitude toward the differences between China and the US — in history, culture, social system, and development path, saying that the differences will most probably remain over the next 100 years.

"But as residents of the same world, we should and can listen to each other, narrow our gap in perceptions of the world, and explore a way to get along based on mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation," he wrote in an article published on The National Interest on Dec 26.

Putin denounces West for 'aggression'

MOSCOW/KYIV — Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a New Year address to Russians, accused Western countries of aggression and claimed they were trying to use the Ukraine conflict to undermine Moscow.

"It was a year of difficult, necessary decisions, the most important steps toward gaining full sovereignty of Russia and powerful consolidation of our society," he said, echoing his repeated contention that Moscow had no choice but to send troops into Ukraine because it threatened Russia's security.

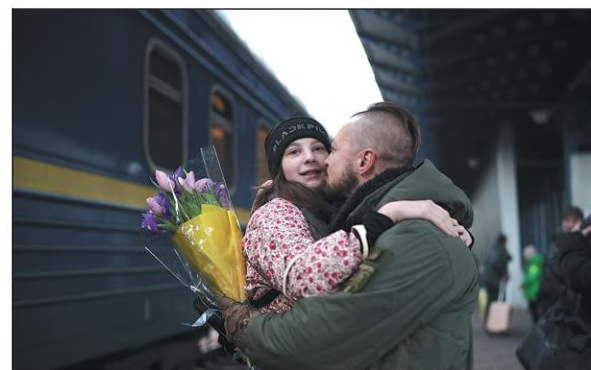
"The West lied about peace, but was preparing for aggression, and today it admits it openly, no longer embarrassed. And they cynically use Ukraine and its people to weaken and split Russia," Putin said on Saturday. "We have never allowed anyone and will not allow anyone to do this."

He added: "For years, the Western elites hypocritically assured all of us of their peaceful intentions, including the resolution of the most difficult conflict in the Donbas."

According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Putin delivered his New Year's speech from the headquarters of Russia's southern military district, where he visited to present awards to service personnel.

Among the recipients of the awards was Russia's commander in Ukraine, General Sergey Surovkin, Russian news agencies said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also delivered a New Year



A Ukrainian soldier hugs his daughter as she arrives at the train station in Kyiv on Saturday. ROMAN HRYSYNA / ASSOCIATED PRESS

speech. "I want to wish all of us one thing — victory. And that's the main thing. One wish for all Ukrainians," Zelensky said in a video message released minutes before midnight on New Year's Eve.

Minutes after Zelensky's speech went out, blasts were heard in Kyiv and around the country. The attacks followed a barrage of more than 20 cruise missiles fired across Ukraine on Saturday, media reported.

Russia and Ukraine said on Saturday they had freed more than 200 captured soldiers, the latest prisoner exchange between the two sides in the conflict, Reuters reported.

Russia's Defense Ministry said 82 Russian soldiers had been released

by Ukraine, while the Ukrainian president's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, said Russia had handed over 140 Ukrainian service personnel.

Some of the 132 Ukrainian men and eight women who were freed had been wounded or had fought to defend the Black Sea port city of Mariupol and on Snake Island, Yermak said in a message on his Telegram page.

A day earlier, the Russian Finance Ministry said in a statement that Russia would continue to limit the share of assets denominated in currencies from "unfriendly" states in its National Wealth Fund.

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PEOPLE



Zhang Xuemei teaches music to visually impaired students at Hengyang Special Education College in Hunan province. LI YANYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Visually impaired kids put auditory gifts to good use

Challenged by musical scores, students master singing through memorization

By ZHU YOUFANG in Changsha and YE ZIZHEN

When God closes a door, he opens a window, the saying goes.

For 18-year-old Zeng Xiaomeng — who lost her sight a few months after she was born due to an illness — her angelic voice is that window. Many remark on the celestial sound of her singing.

In a video of Zeng and three of her schoolmates singing — posted on the internet by their teacher — their beautiful voices have amazed and touched many.

"Thanks to your encouragement and blessings, your openness and praise, we will sing better and live better," the four girls have replied to the messages they receive.

Years ago, when Zeng realized she enjoys music, she talked to her parents about learning to sing. She started her school days at Hengyang Special Education College in Hunan province 11 years ago.

"She has a gift for music and learns songs faster than others," said Zhang Xuemei, Zeng's teacher at the school.

"It is not easy for visually impaired students to learn to sing. They need to use Braille while I read the lyrics. They also need to practice the melody and rhythm repeatedly. It takes up to a month to learn a song."

Repetition is a major learning method for Zeng and the other three girls in her chorus.

"You have to listen to the song many times to learn the emotions behind the lyrics, and when I encounter problems I will ask teachers and friends for help," Zeng said.

A reserved person, Zeng said she rarely talked with others when she first came to the school.

"The environment was totally new to me, both in terms of facilities and people, but gradually I made more friends and became



Zeng Xiaomeng (right) poses with her teacher, Zhang Xuemei (center back) and classmates at a performance in 2019. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

more willing to communicate with others," she said.

School usually starts at 8 am and finishes around 4 pm. Besides music classes, she also takes Chinese, mathematics and massage.

The other three girls in the video are Zeng Lulu, Liu Li and Xu Fang — all music lovers.

Born in 2006, Zeng Lulu enjoys playing drums.

"There is certain distance between each drum, and I need time to memorize the positions of

the drums and cymbals," she said. "It is also harder for us to memorize music scores. Sometimes a song can have up to six pages of scores."

Music has brought great changes to the girls' lives and personalities.

"I think I have become more confident about myself and more optimistic, especially when I know that people encourage us on the internet and say we sang well," Zeng Lulu said.

"I think I have become more confident about myself and more optimistic, especially when I know that people encourage us on the internet and say we sang well."

Zeng Lulu, a visually impaired singer

The teacher Zhang has always been concerned about the future employment of her students.

"There are very few employment opportunities for visually impaired students, but I hope the livestreaming industry may provide a chance," Zhang said.

During summer breaks, Zhang and her students sing on livestreaming platforms. At her suggestion, Zeng Xiaomeng opened her own social media account where people can hear her sing.

"Xiaomeng had the problem of crooked teeth, and she didn't plan to have them adjusted, but with the livestreaming, she now is willing to have her teeth straightened," Zhang said.

"I feel that she became happier since she began communicating with people on the internet," Zeng Xiaomeng's mother said. "I haven't thought about a long-term plan for Xiaomeng, but I am happy she is satisfied with the current situation."

Through her social media account, Zeng Xiaomeng hopes she will be able to attract more fans, and both she and Zeng Lulu want to plant their feet in the music sector in the future.

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Restaurant in Beijing comes alive in silence

By DU JUAN
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Mina's Restaurant in the Songzhuang suburb of Beijing is distinctive not only for its impressively quiet atmosphere and frequently seen artists but for its deaf waiters.

Sign language is the first language at Mina's, and even though most employees are deaf, the restaurant runs in good order serving Sichuan-style dishes.

Since 2008 when it first opened, Mina's has provided jobs for more than 60 hearing-impaired people, which helps to solve the problem of deaf people's employment.

The owners are a couple with kind hearts — Mi Na and Su Qing.

Su, who born in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region in 1969, used to work in the advertising industry. He was also a TV director and had made a documentary film called *The Age of Sign Language*, with Mi, his girlfriend.

Mi, who was born in Chongqing in 1973, used to be a costume designer and art auctioneer. She is now a cook taught by her father.

"Su Qing and I have done a wide range of jobs, but shooting films and documentaries is what we enjoy and keep doing in our spare time," Mi said. It later became the reason for opening the restaurant.

"It's a long story," Mi recalled, describing the experience of Su's eldest brother, who became deaf as a result of drug misuse when he was young. His parents could not pay enough attention to the boy after he lost his hearing. They had no idea how to raise a deaf child. Consequently, the brother drifted away from them and found solace with his deaf friends.

Su, however, remained on good terms with his brother, and even learned sign language by himself, which enabled him to understand deaf people.

He remained curious about the silent world, so when he later got the chance to shoot a documentary, he immediately decided to make one about this unique group of people, and *The Age of Sign Language* was born.

"At that time I was young and bold

enough to try anything new in Beijing, so I made up my mind to open a restaurant," Mi said. "I never thought about hiring deaf employees until Su proposed the idea."

The couple believed artists would be the majority of their customers, as many of them live in Songzhuang.

"Artists seem more tolerant of others, so I accepted his idea," Mi said. "We asked Fang Fang, the heroine of the movie, to work with us, and she agreed. She has become like one of the family now."

When the restaurant was opened in 2008, they had only four deaf waiters besides Fang. Over the past 14 years, around 60 deaf people have worked there.

In the restaurant, cultural activities tailor-made for deaf people are held on Dec 31 every year. "Many deaf people all over China come here to enjoy themselves on this special night, but in the past three years, we could not get together because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe we will meet each other soon after this winter," Mi said.

Lin Fan, a customer who has been to the restaurant often, said there is not much difference of eating there compared with other places.

"The food is good and we can communicate smoothly with body language with those waiters," he said. "The environment is quiet and fit for friends chatting. Mi Na and Su Qing have done a good job by bringing deaf people a social life. We are happy to see them around."

According to the China Disabled Persons' Federation, in 2021 around 8.82 million certified disabled people, both in urban and rural areas in the nation, manage to get jobs.

"It will be increasingly common to be workmates with people having disabilities because of the development of the internet," said Liao Juan, an expert on the employment of people with disabilities and an associate professor of Capital Normal University.

"An increasing number of disabled people are willing to work with us as more jobs emerge," Liao said. "Mina's Restaurant has set a good example in this regard."

Duan Ling contributed to this story.



Top: Mi Na and Su Qing at their restaurant in Beijing. They have hired more than 60 people with hearing loss. Above: Cooks at Mina's Restaurant discuss plans for their New Year's celebration in 2019 with deaf waiters and friends. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Li Hongjia puts a boy's hand on her throat to teach him how to pronounce words. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Teacher overcomes hardship to help deaf-mute children speak

By LIU KUN in Wuhan and ZHU LIXIN

Over the past 13 years, 31-year-old Li Hongjia from Wuhan, Hubei province has helped nearly 500 deaf-mute children return to ordinary schools.

A teacher at the Little Sunflower Rehabilitation Center in Wuhan, Li has gained experience and developed her own techniques for training the children to speak.

For example, when teaching a child to pronounce "tu", which means rabbit, she puts a paper in front of the child's mouth. She said it's a great joy to see the paper moving from the child's breath.

"It gives me happiness to hear the children speaking, especially when they say 'mom' or 'dad' for the first time," Li said. "Sometimes, that first 'mom' make me feel like I was the mother."

Li, who was born in Jingmen of Hubei, entered Hubei University in Wuhan at age 18, majoring in architecture.

"My parents wanted me to follow their path to find a job in the architecture industry, but volunteer service experience changed my mind," she said.

As a freshman, she went to the Little Sunflower Rehabilitation Center as a volunteer and started

working with deaf-mute children.

"One day I found a child with a painful illness. He tried very hard not to cry. He was voiceless but brave, and that touched me deeply," Li said, who decided then that she wanted to help the children more.

After graduation, Li fulfilled her plan to become a teacher at the center — but without support from her parents. In fact, they objected strongly, especially her father.

"My decision was final and could not be changed, and I rented a basement room of less than 10 square meters near the center," she said. "At that time, I took a salary of only 800 yuan (\$115) per month, and the rent

was 200 yuan," Li said, adding that she could not even afford a bed.

To make one, she set up two benches and laid planks between them. Sometimes, she would take children to the room and cook for them.

Li's father refused to see her for nearly a year. Then one day he came to the center to get a better understanding of his daughter's work.

"Seeing the children for the first time, my father's eyes teared up," Li said. "Then he asked me to do my best for them."

The parents then rented an apartment near the center to replace the basement room. They have been liv-

ing with Li to help support her career.

As the children need continuous training, Li works more than 11 hours a day, providing guidance to more than 20 children.

To help more children, she turned to internet to present her own video programs teaching parents how to train their children. Now her social media accounts have more than 760,000 followers.

"If a job is only for the sake of money, I would not choose this one," Li said. "But, this job gives me a great sense of accomplishment."

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READ



Left: A student asks questions during an online class at Andong Primary School in Chengjiang town, Du'an Yao autonomous county, South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. **Right:** A teacher checks a student taking class notes. PHOTOS BY WEI LIANGYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY



Online teaching provides a valuable lesson

Rural schools in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region get connected to more facilities and give students greater opportunities, report **Yang Feiyue** and **Zhang Li** in Nanning.

Zhang Jingwen had her prayer answered at an online space travel class. The 12-year-old got to learn about theories and anecdotes behind the Shenzhou XIV manned spaceship from a scholar thousands of kilometers away from her village home.

Not a new concept for many urban children, online education was a novelty to Jingwen and many of her rural counterparts.

Jingwen, a sixth-grader at Andong Primary School in Chengjiang town, Du'an Yao autonomous county, South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, relishes the knowledge she has acquired.

She jumped at the chance, at the online session in early November, and asked the expert on the other side of the screen about the odds of her getting to communicate with an alien.

The expert didn't give her a definitive answer but piqued her curiosity to dig further into the subject.

"I didn't dream of having the class on the subject and even getting a teacher to answer my questions," says Jingwen.

She has been fascinated by the stars but found little information, such as on TV, and there were no learning materials at school, which has more than 1,000 students.

"Most of the students are from villages," says Huang Zhaohua, the school headmaster.

Huang had been looking for ways to improve the teaching capacity and got what she wished for when she found that an online classroom program was producing fascinating results in Du'an county's Gaoling town, about 30-minute drive away.

The program brings rural schools access to quality education from the cities.

It all started when Chen Yanhui came on the scene.

After finishing his doctoral degree in physical electronics at Peking University in 2018, Chen engaged in high-tech work at the Guangxi development and reform commission.

In April last year, Chen was sent by the commission to Jiaquan village, Gaoling, as a first Party secretary.

When he paid a visit to Jiaquan Primary School, the only teaching spot in the village, the 35-year-old was heartbroken by what he saw.

It was the rainy season in May, the mountain moisture shrouded the teaching place that was hidden in the mountain. "The student dorm building was located on the hillside and some windows were broken, allowing moisture directly into the room," Chen recalls.

As he touched the quilts, some of them were so damp water could be wrung out of them.

That was when he decided to improve the school's infrastructure as a matter of urgency.

Under recommendation from the social organization bureau with Guangxi's civil affairs department, Chen decided to work with the Guangxi Youth Development Foundation.

More than 1.2 million yuan (\$172,400) was used to upgrade the



Students take an online class in Chengjiang town, Du'an Yao autonomous county, South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

school and to construct a library, calligraphy room and a reading garden. Children from neighboring villages, whose parents had left home to earn a living in bigger cities, have also been encouraged to join the school.

Yet, it soon came to Chen's attention that the infrastructure upgrade was not enough.

He noticed that the insufficient learning resources for comprehensive development courses were a major obstacle against rural schools, and he knew he had to do something.

"I found out that the school actually has an 'all-in-one' multimedia teaching machine that can be connected to teaching resources outside through the network," Chen says.

Then he came up with the idea of tapping into the rich urban education supplies and transferring them to the rural classroom via the internet.

Since Du'an got out of poverty in 2020, the county has installed more than 2,200 such multimedia machines for about 400 local middle and primary schools through an "education informatization" project. Jiaquan village is one of them.

"Now that villages have all been connected to the internet, while many of my classmates and friends have teaching support experience and care about rural education, it's possible to bring the two sides together," Chen explains.

His idea of the cloud classroom



A teacher gives an online class at Andong Primary School.

immediately got support from the local government and volunteers.

Faculty members and graduates from Peking University contributed to the design of the curricula.

The idea is to have experts from all walks of life to give lectures that are tailored to the needs of students in the fourth to sixth grades.

"The content will not be about school subjects, but focus on traditional culture," Chen says, adding that the goal is to have children exposed to art and science, such as poetry, calligraphy and music, and broaden their horizon.

Zhao Yanfen, associate professor from the School of Chinese As a Second Language, Peking University, was invited to serve as a teacher and chief consultant in course design.

"Our starting point is to enable children to be exposed to the essence of good traditional culture from an early age and to nourish their bodies and minds with rich extracurricular knowledge," Zhao says.

"At the same time, we add music, calligraphy, psychological education, astronomy and other courses so that children can better perceive

the truth of how to conduct themselves," Zhao says.

To date, professors from the Peking University, researchers from the Palace Museum, teachers from the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater, as well as college students from the Beijing Normal University and the Minzu University of China have all joined Chen's cause, which took off in March.

The online classes have become a hit with students since the launch. "We make use of the 'interest-fostering class' time and give the children a weekly livestreaming class," he says.

"A total of 10 classes have been tried in Jiaquan village, and the children have positively changed a lot and quickly, which gave us a lot of confidence."

Word spread fast, especially in the rural areas of Du'an where educational resources are eagerly sought.

More than 20 primary schools across Gaoling town then followed suit and tuned into the online classroom.

It didn't take long before Huang Zhaohua from Andong Primary School heard of its success.

"I sat in on the online classes myself, and found them a nice complement to what the school offers," Huang says.

She applied them to more than 30 classes of the school in October.

"Although there is now a vast amount of knowledge available online, it takes a lot of time and

effort for schools to screen this information," Huang says.

"It is much more difficult to find resources that really fit the psychological conditions and the acceptance level of children in this age group," she adds.

She believes that the online classroom is customized for primary school students and can help protect and stimulate children's curiosity.

"The children can communicate and interact with experts and scholars in various fields without having to leave home, which will encourage them to learn," Huang says.

Moreover, the classroom program also offers faculty training, such as Mandarin, which Huang says is of great benefit to ethnic teachers.

"We have also asked our teachers to listen carefully and take students to do some extended thinking after the (online) class to develop their interests.

"Next, I hope that the course will be more systematic and increase the training of teachers in such areas as teaching etiquette," Huang says, adding that the format of livestreaming class training can achieve full coverage "at our teachers' level as compared to our existing training mechanisms".

To date, more than 20 teachers have joined the program, and classes, including those on calligraphy, painting and astronomy, have been given on a regular basis.

At its peak, more than 10,000 students from rural Guangxi listen to a class simultaneously.

"The teachers are knowledgeable and give lively classes, and they also carry out online interactive communications, which is of great interest to the students," says Wei Deng, headmaster of the Gaoling Central Primary School.

"They can see a wider world outside, and the seeds of exploring the knowledge are planted in their hearts," Wei adds.

Li Jianjun, Party secretary of Du'an, says that he hopes the learning mode can be promoted to benefit more schools in the country's remote mountainous areas and thus help high-quality education development.

So far, positive influences have already shown themselves in the student response.

"It felt magical how a teacher can teach us thousands of kilometers away," Jingwen says about her experience at online classroom.

Ever since Jingwen took the space travel class, she has taken the initiative to read up on related materials.

"I have known where I can find what I'm looking for through the online class," she says.

Moreover, her interest in dancing and music has also been satisfied through the rich classroom arrangement.

"I think my biggest take-away from these lectures is I realized that people need to have their own interests so that they can experience more fun outside of classroom, enjoy learning and life," she says.

Contact the writers at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn

IMAGE



Yang Mingjin drives into the village to play a public welfare film in Luzhang town of Lushui county, Nujiang prefecture of Yunnan province, on October 21, 2022. PHOTOS BY HU CHAO/XINHUA

Projectionist finds fulfillment in giving back

Yang Mingjin who is from Lushui county of Nujiang, in southwest China's Yunnan province, has worked as a volunteer projectionist for more than 20 years. Yang said his obsession with motion pictures dates back to childhood. He started voluntary screenings in the late 1990s, shortly after he graduated from a vocational school for auto repair, bearing all the costs himself. Over the past two decades, the dedicated

projectionist has toured numerous villages and screened thousands of movies out in the open. He said this has given him a great sense of fulfillment. Today, the local region has been lifted out of extreme poverty and local people have more options for entertainment, but Yang believes the open-air cinema will always play a special role especially for the children and elderly people left behind.

HU CHAO / XINHUA



Yang Mingjin shows a movie to children in a special education school in Lushui county, Nujiang prefecture, on October 22, 2022.



From left to right: Yang Mingjin changes tires at a tire shop in Lushui county of Nujiang prefecture, Yunnan province, on October 21, 2022. Yang plays a movie at the film exhibition hall in Lushui county of Nujiang prefecture, Yunnan province, on October 22, 2022. Yang checks film at the film exhibition hall in Lushui county of Nujiang prefecture, Yunnan province, on October 23, 2022.



From left to right: Yang Mingjin installs a curtain in Denggen village of Luzhang town, Lushui county of Nujiang prefecture, in October 21, 2022. Yang Mingjin shows a movie to children in a special education school in Lushui county, Nujiang prefecture, on October 22, 2022.

TREND

Empty shelves in the egg aisle inside a supermarket in London in November, due to supply issues caused by a bird flu pandemic and the growing cost-of-living crisis. UK retailers are cutting jobs and scaling back investment in response to mounting economic gloom, according to the Confederation of British Industry.

BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES



UK shortages egged on by several crises

From avian flu, to rising energy costs and labor shortages, Britain's agricultural sector is facing a bleak 2023. However, there may be lessons to learn from China, **Xing Yi** reports in London

Since mid-November, grocery shoppers in London have noticed something weird in the local supermarket chains Tesco and Lidl: People can't always find eggs on the shelves. Where normally boxes of different kinds of eggs used to be, instead, they find notices that read: "We are limiting these products to three per customer, so that everyone can get what they need."

In some other supermarket chains, such as Asda, the quota for egg purchases per person has been set at two boxes. And according to the British Free Range Egg Producers Association, the rationing will last beyond Christmas.

The direct cause of the egg supply shortage is a widespread bird flu pandemic that has been raging since last year, and which hit the United Kingdom the worst. The association said that bird flu-related culls had claimed 750,000 laying hens since Oct 1 alone, compared with 1.8 million over the whole of last year.

Could the avian flu become the last straw to a slow-burn food supply crisis in the UK, aggravated by the cost-of-living crisis, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and a post-Brexit shortage of labor? The answer remains to be seen, but the affected farmers and consumers are the ones currently suffering.

Besides egg rationing, the price of turkeys has also gone up: Among 27 like-for-like products of Christmas birds available last year and now, all but one had seen a price rise of at least 12 percent. The average price increase was 24.4 percent across this group, according to a report based on data from supermarket analysts Assosia.

The biggest jump was a 45.3 percent increase in the price of a Morrisons British large whole turkey to £31.44 (\$37.92), and even the price of frozen turkeys rose by around 18.1 percent, it showed.

Half of the 1.2 million free-range turkeys and geese reared for Christmas in the UK have been killed or culled because of the bird flu, according to Richard Griffith, chief executive of British Poultry Council.

"This year is the worst bird flu that we've ever seen. Around 36 percent of poultry farms in the country are covered by some form of control," he told a Parliamentary hearing of the environment, food and rural affairs committee on Nov 29. "The on-costs for industry and food production are potentially enormous."

A report published by the House of Lords Library in November said that the UK has experienced its largest outbreak of bird flu, an outbreak that led to the death of 97 million birds globally and 3.8 million in the country, with significant consequences for agriculture.

"Experts have warned that infections could rise even higher over the winter of 2022-23," said the report, adding that the UK government has imposed mandatory housing for all poultry, amended its culling compensation scheme and relaxed the sale regulations of defrosted poultry.

But the compensation for farmers was deemed "unfair", as payment is only made for healthy birds that are culled by government vets. Because the current strain of bird flu kills birds so quickly, a large number of them die between notification of infection by farmers and the arrival of the vets for culling.

Paul Kelly, a poultry farmer at Kelly Turkeys, said: "The current compensation scheme dates back to 1981, that's when avian influenza was 'low pathogenic' and it didn't kill the birds, but the problem now is that it turned into 'high pathogenic' and the infected turkeys die within four days."

Three of Kelly's poultry farms have been hit by the bird flu this year. "In one farm with 9,500 turkeys, the first infection was on Thursday evening, with 20 mortalities. By Monday lunchtime, they were all dead," he said. "It's devastating."

Robert Goodwill, chair of Parliament's environment, food and rural affairs committee, wrote a letter to the Cabinet in November, asking for a revision of the compensation rule, as "this can have a particular impact on smaller producers who keep birds in a single location and can lose their entire flock during an outbreak."

"If the sector is not able to restock, the supply issues we are seeing will continue to get worse, making the UK more reliant on imports and undermining our food security," wrote Goodwill.

Rising energy costs

Moreover, it is not only the stable production of Christmas poultry and eggs that are at risk, so are fruits and vegetables, but for other causes — labor shortages and rising energy costs.

Scholars have long established the links between energy and food security, and found agricultural food prices rise with any fluctuation in oil prices, and an inflation in the price of oil threatens not only energy security, but food security as well.

Earlier this year, the World Bank said in a report that the increase in energy prices over the past two years has been the largest since the 1973 oil crisis. Price increases for food commodities and fertilizers, which rely on natural gas as a production input, have been the largest since 2008.

In November, Britain faced an inflation increase of 11.1 percent, a 40-year high, a large part of which is contributed to by soaring energy prices.

According to Britain's National Farmers' Union, which represents more than 46,000 farming businesses in the UK, this year, energy-intensive crops, including tomatoes, cucumbers and pears, are on track for their lowest recorded yields since 1985.

It also told the BBC that milk prices were likely to fall below the cost of production, while beef farmers were considering reducing the number of cows they breed. Rising costs were to blame, it said, with fertilizer prices for farmers more than tripling since 2019 and the cost of feed and diesel up by 75 percent.

"(There are) huge issues for pigs, for poultry meat, for eggs, for fresh produce," NFU's president, Minette Batters, told journalists, warning that more agricultural companies have been pushed out of business, as there were currently 7,000 fewer registered agricultural companies in the UK than in 2019.

But, in December, the UK's Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Theresa Coffey, ruled out government measures of intervention to help farmers and consumers. The Guardian reported that Coffey acknowledged the growing

demand for food banks around the country, and pointed to steps such as the forthcoming increase in benefits and measures to reduce energy bills, but declined to promise any further support.

She said: "It is not the role of the government to provide free food."

Besides the soaring energy costs that drove down food production, getting enough labor into the UK has become a particular issue since Brexit was officially completed in 2020.

Tom Bradshaw, deputy president of NFU, wrote a letter to the UK's immigration minister on Nov 29, expressing the union's concern over visas for next year's seasonal workers.

The current Seasonal Worker Scheme was launched by the Johnson government in March 2019 with an initial quota of 2,500 places per year, and currently stood at 38,000, plus another 2,000 for poultry workers.

The Johnson Government said that the quota would be reduced to 30,000 in 2023 and 28,000 in 2024. By contrast, during the short premiership of Liz Truss, the government increased the quota.

However, there has been no confirmation that an increase will be pursued under the current prime minister, Rishi Sunak, nor has there been an announcement on the future of the scheme beyond 2024.

"The news that the Seasonal Workers Scheme is guaranteed until 2024 was a welcome boost for growers last year. However, we remain concerned that the number of visas available are not sufficient to prevent further crop losses and a continued fall in UK production," Bradshaw said.

According to NFU surveys, more than £22 million worth of fruit and vegetables has been wasted directly due to workforce shortages in the first half of this year, and the NFU said the sector requires 70,000 workers.

"It's nothing short of a travesty that quality, nutritious food is being wasted at a time when families across the country are already struggling to make ends meet because of soaring living costs," said Bradshaw.

"This means increasing the number of visas available to meet the sector's needs and expanding it to a minimum five-year rolling scheme to enable growers to have the confidence to invest in their businesses."

Important factors

However, a report by researchers from University of Oxford and Leeds University, based on the immigration data since 2019, suggested that Brexit is not the only reason for the labor shortage, adding that the pandemic, international sector-specific labor shortages, and an increase in early retirement have been more important factors.

The report co-author, Chris Forde of Leeds University, said: "While there is some evidence that the end of free movement has contributed to shortages in some areas of

the UK labor market, it is by no means the only driver. In fact, recruiting difficulties are not unique to the UK and several other countries have experienced high vacancy rates post-pandemic."

The UK is just one of the many countries facing a food supply challenge, which is the fallout of the pandemic, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the more frequent extreme weather due to climate change.

According to the 2023 Global Humanitarian Overview, by the end of this year, more than 222 million people across 53 countries may suffer from acute food insecurity, putting their lives or livelihoods in danger because they do not have enough to eat.

Next year will set another record for humanitarian relief requirements, with 339 million people in need of assistance in 69 countries, an increase of 65 million people compared to the same time last year, the United Nations and partner organizations said on Dec 1.

To tackle the crisis, the UK government has published its Government Food Strategy in June, in which it stated the country is largely self-sufficient in wheat, meats, eggs, and some sectors of vegetable production, and that, for the past 20 years, the UK has produced around 75 percent of what its people consume, which the government is committed to maintaining in the future.

It also noted that, to keep food prices down, barrier-free food trade is required, and it called upon all countries, including those in the World Trade Organization, to keep food trade flowing and avoid trade-restrictive measures.

Sustainable diet

Promoting a healthier and sustainable diet was stressed in the strategy, as the latest data shows that around 64 percent of adults and 40 percent of children in England are overweight or living with obesity due to the "Junk Food Cycle", which means food companies invest more money creating calorie-dense foods to make people eat more of them and expand the market, leading to a feedback loop promoting more investment and making people eat more.

An analysis by consulting firm SYSTEM-IQ shows that by cutting meat production by just 13 percent — the equivalent of European consumers going meat-free for one day a week — the EU could reallocate enough grain and land currently used to feed livestock to offset the 23 million metric tons of wheat produced by Ukraine in 2020.

Sarah Lake, executive director of Madre Brava, a nonprofit organization advocating the reduction of the centrality of meat in food sales, said in a commentary to China Daily: "Simply put, the meat industry's inefficient use of fertilizers drives up food prices, exacerbates world hunger, and pushes farmers into poverty."

"Reallocating land from meat production to grains, vegetables, legumes, and alternative proteins would be a far more effective way to feed a growing population on a warming planet."

China example

To put the food crisis issue in a broader context, some scholars suggested that the global food crisis is the natural consequence of the international capitalist food system, in which developed countries buy cheap food from around the world to sustain their industrialization.

Xu Zhun, associate professor of economics at The City University of New York, wrote an article Granary or Food Crisis: Coming Out of the 200-Year International Food System, arguing that the large-scale food trade emerged as a result of unequal development of capitalism, while the UK, as the first industrial country, sought food supplies from its colonies. After World War II, the United States supplanted the UK and dominated the global food system by exporting its cheap agricultural products to the countries in the Third World.

"It's not saying to stop food trade, but developing countries should be able to hold the rice bowl in their own hands... countries should see food production, farmers and the agricultural industry as a whole development strategy," said Xu.

"China is a good example. It participated in the global trade of agricultural products, but in general, it has maintained autonomy in the process of industrialization and urbanization," he added.

China has long adopted a national strategy for food security, characterized by self-sufficiency based on domestic grain production, moderate imports and technological support. It has also established a strict farmland protection system and adopted a policy to ensure the sustainable use of farmland and self-reliance in seeds.

Earlier in October, Cong Liang, director of the National Food and Strategic Reserves Administration, said China's ability to ensure its national food security continues to improve, with grain output reaching a record high of 683 million metric tons last year.

"With good grain conditions, our rice bowls are held firmly in the hands of Chinese people and are mainly filled with Chinese food," Cong said.

China has also been providing support to African countries for more than two decades, with farming techniques and personnel training. The continent has 60 percent of the world's potentially arable land, but many African countries still suffer from food insecurity and a low-productive agricultural sector.

Philip Isdor Mpango, vice-president of Tanzania, said during the Averting a Global Food Crisis session at the World Economic Forum in May, that more investment is needed in agriculture, including in irrigation, rural roadbuilding, and involving the younger population of the continent.

"We must strategize so that we have the young people involved throughout the agricultural value chain," he said. "If we do this for the very short term in Africa, we can turn this crisis into an actual opportunity for the continent. But, critically, it is important that we get global partnerships, and this is what has changed on the continent recently."

BIZ LIFE

RV production in full swing in Shandong

Rongcheng aims to grow sector into pillar by building complete export supply chain

By ZHAO RUIXUE in Jinan
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On the production lines run by a recreational vehicle producer in Rongcheng, a county-level city in Shandong province, workers were busy assembling camper trailers in late November. These campers will soon be shipped to overseas markets including the United States and South Korea.

During the first 10 months of 2022, over 1.3 billion yuan (\$186.2 million) worth of RVs were exported via Rongcheng Customs, a year-on-year increase of 20.9 percent, said the department.

Good performance overseas

Liu Shaoxun, general manager of Rongcheng Compaks New Energy Automobile Co Ltd, said the company was scheduled to produce a total of 6,000 RVs in 2022 according to placed orders, including self-propelled vehicles and trailers.

"Around 95 percent of RVs we produce, mainly trailers, are for overseas markets," Liu said.

Founded in 2014, Compaks has developed into a major trailer exporter in China thanks to supportive local government policies.

"Rongcheng aims to build the RV sector into a pillar industry by developing a complete RV industrial chain, which benefits us in sectors ranging from parts purchasing and marketing," he said.

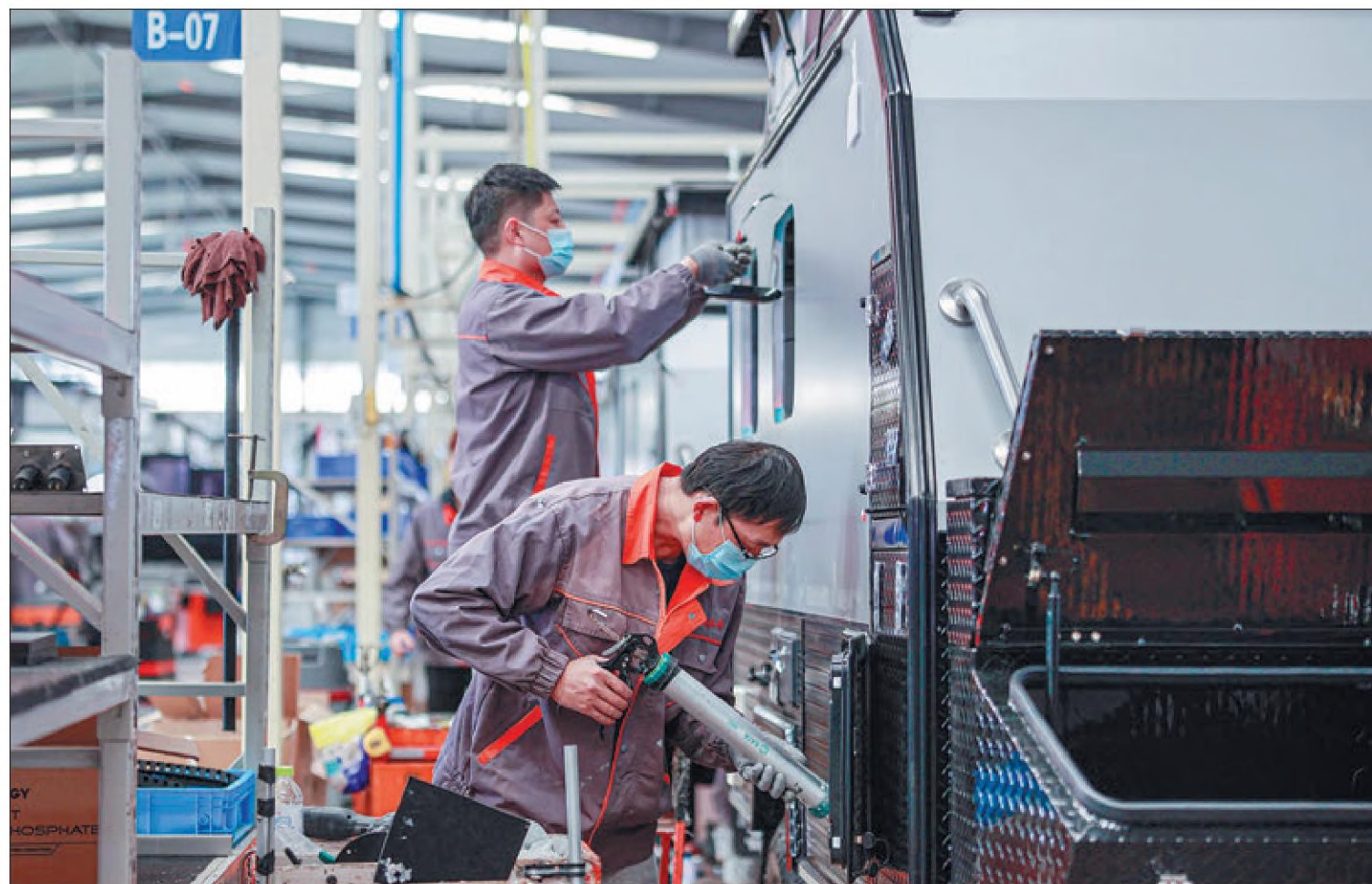
The city, which has a population of 714,000, is now home to 10 RV producers. The RV industry provides jobs for over 4,000 people in the city. There are also more than 50 RV accessories and parts suppliers as well as production enterprises running businesses ranging from steel materials to air conditioners and wood floorboards and panels, according to statistics provided by the city government.

RV producers in Rongcheng make 30 percent of all RVs in China and its RV exports account for 70 percent of total RV exports by unit volume nationwide. The city was named an export base for RVs in 2017 by the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers.

Located on the easternmost tip of the Shandong Peninsula, Rongcheng faces Japan and South Korea across the sea. Both seaports and the China-Europe Railway Express freight trains provide convenient access for products produced in the city to reach overseas markets.

The convenient shipment process and comfortable and pleasant living environment offer Rongcheng advantages to develop the RV industry, which caters to tourism and recreational sector participants, Zheng Yuewen, mayor of Rongcheng, said at an RV promotion conference held in the city in October.

A total of 21,000 RVs, including self-propelled models and trailers, rolled off production lines in Rongcheng in 2021, generating total sales of two billion yuan.



Workers assemble recreational vehicle components at a factory of Rongcheng Compaks New Energy Automobile Co Ltd in Rongcheng, Shandong province, in November.

LI XINJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY



An aerial view of an RV campsite in Rongcheng, Shandong province. LI XINJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Trailers produced in the city are sold to countries including Australia, New Zealand, the US, South Korea and Japan, said the city's bureau of industry and information technology.

In countries like the US, Canada and Australia, trailers usually account for 90 percent of total RV sales, Cui Dongshu, secretary-general of the China Passenger Car Association, said in a recent article about the RV market.

Cui said trailers are preferred by people in those countries mainly because there are more vehicles

that can be used to tow trailers, and in addition, trailers are more affordably priced.

To expand overseas markets, Compaks has built a warehouse in Australia and a production plant in South Korea.

"The overseas facilities have been playing an important role in ensuring steady product supply and after-sale service for offshore markets," said Liu.

The RCEP Certificate of Origin, which offers preferential tariff treatment, has given RV producers in Rongcheng a boost to expand overseas markets.

Molin Automotive Technology Co Ltd in Rongcheng sold more than 2,150 RVs to overseas markets during the first 10 months of 2022.

Molin had applied for 180 certificates of origin, which had saved 10 million yuan in tariffs for the company, according to an article published on the official website of Qingdao Customs, which oversees Rongcheng Customs.

Qingdao Customs has been using smart systems to verify certificate applications submitted by companies to ensure companies get certificates in a timely fashion.

Innovation-driven technologies

RV producers in Rongcheng are building state-of-the-art production lines to increase productivity.

Rongcheng Mingjun Outdoor Leisure Products Co Ltd spent more than 80 million yuan building two workshops that cover a total area of 10,000 square meters to produce RVs.

The automated welding workshop and assembly workshop will boost RV productivity in Rongcheng, said Xiu Chuanyi, executive supervisor of the company.

Mingjun has teamed up with Harbin University of Science and Technology to jointly develop welding technology, a major process used in trailer production.

To meet consumer demand for personalized designs, Compaks has been using an industrial internet system through which consumers can select customized options.

"For example, consumers can choose furniture according to their needs, a bunk bed or a single-person bed, an outside cooking facility or an inside one," said Liu.

Compaks spends 6 percent of its sales income on innovation annually, in a bid to provide more comfortable and reliable products for consumers, Liu added.

For example, it took the company one year to find a way to replace its steel chassis with an aluminum alloy alternative to make the trailer lighter and thus more fuel efficient, he said.

Eyes on the homefront

In China, RVs are favored by con-

sumers. A total of 12,582 RVs were sold in China in 2021, a year-on-year increase of 43.2 percent. Meanwhile, 3,543 trailers were sold over the same period, according to statistics released by the China Automobile Dealers Association.

The International RV and Camping Expo held in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, in June attracted over 100 companies. During the four-day expo, more than 300 RVs were sold. "There is a big potential to develop the domestic RV market as more and more people would like to experience RV tours," Liu said.

This past summer, more than 20 campers at a campsite along the coastline in Rongcheng were fully booked for several months, showcasing that RV-themed tourism is welcomed by tourists, he said.

Rongcheng also has a few projects in its development plans to boost the RV industry, including the building of an international campsite and holding an international conference on RV tourism.

The RV market is supported by national policies. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) for the development of cultural and tourism sectors calls for creating an overall RV-centric tourism industrial chain and building new campsites and tourist centers.

"More camping sites need to be established in our country to provide convenient services for people, such as facilities used to charge and get water," said Liu.

"RV demand will increase with more campsites and support facilities being built in the near future," he added.

Recreational vehicles taking roads by storm as China embraces wanderlust

By ZHU WENQIAN
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Taking road trips in recreational vehicles has become a new trend in China and continues to gain in popularity, but the business is still nascent in the country compared with more developed markets.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic first struck some three years ago, more and more travelers prefer to drive themselves on trips, as it is more private, flexible and safer thanks to social distancing factors. In the first half of 2022, sales revenues of RV trips on Fliggy, the travel arm of Alibaba Group, nearly tripled the level recorded in the same period of 2019, when there was no pandemic.

As a newly emerging market sector, the supply of RVs in China has been relatively scattered and some standards are not unified. Some first-time drivers don't know enough



Travelers participate in a workout activity at a recreational vehicle campsite in Yongjing county, Gansu province, in May.

CHEN BIN / XINHUA

about how to take care of RVs.

In November, Fliggy, the online travel platform that was the first to offer RV tours in China, cooperated with some business operators and introduced nine service standards to jointly promote the upgrading of the service level of the RV travel industry.

Such requirements serve as the first industry service standards for the RV sector in China and include services such as penalty-free cancellations, emergency rescue and repair, and one-on-one guidance.

"Taking self-driving tours by RV can bring consumers different and

wonderful experiences, and the sector shows booming growth prospects. Yet, at the initial stage of development, overall services available are not standardized and normative enough. We hope to help solve some real problems for the industry and consumers by introducing RV tour service standards," said Cui Yupeng, deputy general manager of the vacation department at Fliggy.

Wang Yankun, founder of Wolf Totem Travel Agency, which is based in Heilongjiang province in Northeast China and mainly offers long-haul domestic road trips, said although the RV travel market has grown rapidly in the past few years in China, the supply of RVs is still insufficient.

"Suppliers implement their own sets of service standards. The standards in terms of vehicle conditions and onboard services are different, and this may cause some problems for tourists and increase the service

costs of business retailers. It is helpful to improve the overall service level by formulating unified service standards," Wang said.

Most RVs feature beds, a kitchen with a table, a refrigerator, a sink and a cooking stove along with a toilet, and they become more affordable options compared with staying at hotels. The total sales of RVs in China had increased from less than 5,000 in 2017 to some 12,600 in 2021, according to the China Passenger Car Association.

Compared with Europe and the United States, the RV market in China is still in its infancy. RVs have become an important part of residents' daily lives and leisure travel in the US, and sales of RVs in the country exceeded 600,000 in 2022, according to the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association in the US.

Domestically, Chengdu, Sichuan province; Urumqi, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region; and Kunming,

Yunnan province, topped the list of destinations that travelers would like to visit by RV, according to a report released by online travel platform Tongcheng Travel and auto information provider Autohome Inc in November.

More than 90 percent of respondents said they prefer to take self-driving trips using their own vehicles, and SUVs were their top choice. Driving RVs is becoming more popular in China, and 7 percent of respondents said they would choose RVs when taking self-driving trips, according to the report that surveyed some 3,000 people nationwide.

Young travelers aged between 20 and 40 serve as the main groups who often take self-driving trips, and the number of people who would like to take self-driving trips alone continues to increase. In 2022, about 60 percent of surveyed travelers took one to three-day self-driving trips, the report said.

TRAVEL

The New Year arrives in Northeast China with really cold days and nights, but it's also peak season for winter tourism of both conventional and unconventional sorts.

In this season, the provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang, for instance, are working hard to expand activities in the wonderlands of ice and snow, where conventional activities include skiing and unconventional ones include art extravaganzas, featuring ice sculptures.

The 2022 Winter Olympics were held in Beijing and nearby Hebei province, also in the country's north, in early 2022.

In the region, Jilin has kept its focus on building a snow-and-ice industrial system combining tourism, sports, culture and equipment manufacturing. The construction of "ice-and-snow sports towns" and ski resorts of large and medium sizes also continues, with the aim of attracting more tourists to the province to experience winter fun, according to the local government.

Over the past five years, the province has developed an ice-and-snow industry in "Jilin style" and seen achievements in innovation, policy guidance, "breakthrough ideas", cultural confidence and the cultivation of talent, said Mu Dapeng, director of the provincial sports bureau.

"During the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-25), Jilin will give prominence to building a 'new highland' for the innovation and development of the ice-and-snow industry in China."

According to a provincial development plan, by 2025, the monetary size of its ice-and-snow industry is expected to reach 250 billion yuan (\$35.8 billion). The province will aim to complete the construction of 100 ski resorts and a large ice-and-snow sports resort as one of the major areas that can engage 300 million people in winter sports in the country.

Now, the province has some 75 ski resorts, with a total of 319 ski slopes, which can handle up to 100,000 people a day, making Jilin the skiing hub of the country. Data from the provincial culture and tourism department showed that during the 2021-2022 snow season, the online sale of ice-and-snow products in Jilin was the most in China.

Night skiing

From early November, ski lodges in the province began to open doors to skiers, snowboarders and other winter sports enthusiasts.

Jilin has the largest ski resorts in China, including Lake Songhua Resort, Beidahu Ski Resort and Wanda White Mountain Resort.

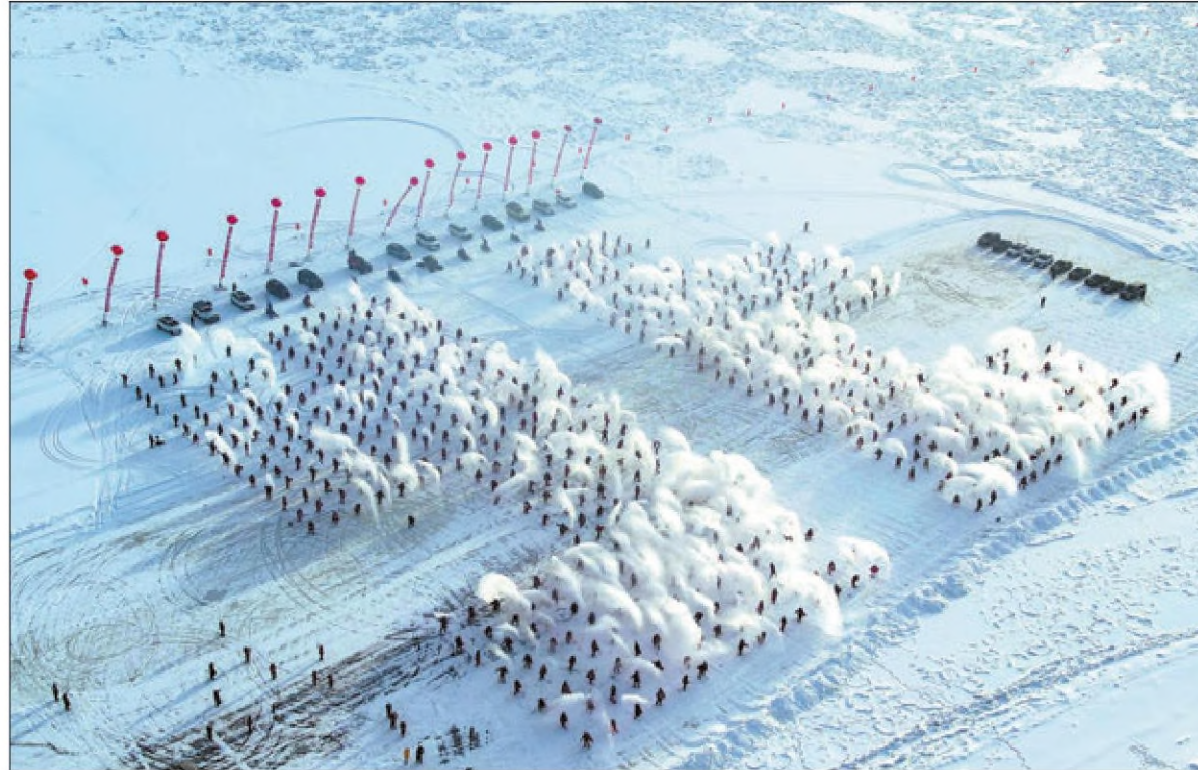
Zhang Yibing, 60, an enthusiastic snowboarder from Changchun, the provincial capital, has become a "big star" among skiers at the Lake Songhua Resort in Jilin city since it opened in January 2015.

"I began to ski in 2002 and have been enchanted with snowboarding for 17 years," he said. "It's a great thrill for a snowboarder like me to enjoy the resort where the infrastructure has been built at an international level."

He spends most of his spare time in winter at the resort, especially after his workload began to reduce due to age in recent years.

"Traveling from Changchun is convenient," he said. "I spend only one and a half hours driving or 40 minutes by high-speed railway."

"Jilin province has some of the country's best resources and favorable temperatures for winter sports," he added. "For those who come from



Hundreds of residents and tourists in Heilongjiang province join a traditional activity of tossing hot water from pots into the freezing air, creating a spectacular scene as the water instantly freezes to form icy arcs and spiky "clouds", at the opening ceremonies of the first Polar Forest Ice Carnival and the 13th Winter Solstice Cultural Festival in the province's Beiji village, Mohe city, on Dec 18. SHAO TIANLI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Cold comfort

The country's northeast builds on winter tourism, as a legacy of the 2022 Games, report **Liu Mingtai** in Changchun and **Zhou Huiying** in Harbin

the south, frequent flights and high-speed trains can make their trips easier."

Since the opening of the new winter season in Changchun, 44-year-old photographer Zhang Jiadong spends much of his spare time taking photos for skiers at the city's Miaoxiang Mountain Ski Resort to record their special moments.

"I found that a lot of enthusiasts like to ski in the evenings," he said. "It has become fashionable among office workers."

For the new season, lighting systems to illuminate the slopes have been renovated, said Zhang Yinan, a staff member at the resort.

Night skiing is open from 5:30 pm to 9 pm, attracting many office workers.

Zhang Jiadong said he also found that more children are taking to winter sports.

"The 2022 Winter Olympics have aroused public interest in winter sports in the country," he said. "Skiing has become an essential skill for many people to acquire."

The annual skiing season lasts for about 150 days in Jilin and a series of activities during the period is expected to boost development of the ice-and-snow economy in the region, according to local officials.

Ice festival

Neighboring Heilongjiang province is also working out its plan for winter tourism.

For this winter season, the provincial culture and tourism department has launched major themed tourism products such as viewing



Tourists on top of a 500-meter ice slide at the 24th Harbin Ice and Snow World in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, which opened in December. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Workers process ice blocks for the 24th Harbin Ice and Snow World. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A father helps his child put on gloves before skiing at Miaoxiang Mountain Ski Resort in Changchun, Jilin. ZHANG JIADONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

winter scenery and experiencing related cultural activities across some 148 tourist spots. There are some 65 experience-themed destinations where tourists can enjoy the province's winter scenery.

After years of development of winter tourism routes and products, the provincial capital Harbin, also known as "ice city", has formed a relatively mature system and become a popular choice for tourists.

Residents and tourists in Harbin can easily find wintertime experiences through its ice-and-snow sculptures and entertainment offerings.

The 24th Harbin Ice and Snow World opened on Dec 17, welcoming the first visitors to the winter wonderland in Harbin. As an important part of the city's winter tourism season, the park has seasonally opened for 23 consecutive years.

Across the 810,000-square-meter amusement park, which combines ice, snow, and sound and lights, visitors can appreciate more than 100 groups of artworks made with ice rather than commonly used construction materials.

As people-made ice often contains air bubbles and is not strong enough to carve, ice for the festival is initially gathered from Songhua River, which runs through the city.

Under the rules, each block of ice must be 80 centimeters wide, 40 cm thick and 120 cm long.

After the first block of ice was pulled from the frozen river in early December, as much as 150,000 cubic meters of ice was transformed into fanciful buildings and sculptures, turning the park into an icy wonderland.

Tourists can participate in many activities, including riding on a 500-meter ice slide, the longest at the park to date.

A Ferris wheel in the shape of a giant snowflake has been built to provide a thrilling experience in a dazzling world after dark.

"Due to our concern about health safety on a long journey, I have suspended my family's annual travel plans," said local resident Zhou Xuan. "But as the most famous tourist spot in the city, my husband and I brought our 10-year-old son for a visit here."

"We are all surprised to find such a spectacular landscape even though we are so familiar with ice and snow," she added.

Another important event in the city — the 35th China Harbin Sun Island International Snow Sculpture Art Expo — kicked off on Dec 22, following three weeks of preparation.

At the expo, which is held at Sun Island Park, tourists can view 160 sets of snow sculptures that use more than 150,000 cubic meters of snow, including the 100-meter-long main sculpture, "Chasing a dream", which was completed in 10 days by 70 sculptors. It is based on the "flying maidens" of Buddhist art in Dunhuang, Gansu province, and combines aerospace elements to express the vision of the whole country toward a happy future.

Several snow sculpture competitions will be held at the park during the expo, which will last through February.

Northernmost city

Despite temperatures in Mohe dropping to minus 40 C, China's northernmost city is presenting its winter charm to tourists.

The city is one of the few places in China with a subarctic climate — long, severe winters and short, warm summers. Winter begins in early to mid-October and lasts until late April. It is the coldest place in China, holding the record for the lowest temperature at minus 52.3 C in 1956.

Beiji village, 88 kilometers from the city center, virtually attracts all visitors to Mohe, to see China's northernmost bank and post office, as well as to experience traditional rural life in the country's northeast.

The first Polar Forest Ice Carnival and the 13th Winter Solstice Cultural Festival kicked off on Dec 18 in Beiji, attracting thousands of residents and tourists to join various local folk activities related to ice and snow.

At the opening ceremony, hundreds joined a traditional activity of tossing hot water from pots into the freezing air, creating a spectacular scene as the water instantly froze into icy arcs and spiky "clouds".

"With a variety of winter activities, more residents are attracted to the festival," said local resident Wang Jianlong, adding that it brings people close to nature, too. "Our interest in ice and snow has given new life to the beautiful scenery in Mohe, stirring up winter in the border area."

Zhou Lin, a travel researcher with the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, said: "Winter tourism in China is producing a new consumption trend. However, it is important to promote consumer experience rather than just trying to expand the market."

Product managers should pay attention to innovation in winter tourism to suit various consumers and improve services, she added.

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Tourists cycle on ice at the 24th Harbin Ice and Snow World. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Skiers enjoy the snow at Lake Songhua Resort in Jilin city, Jilin. SI NUO / FOR CHINA DAILY

SPORTS

BILLIARDS



People play pool in an open space in Harare, Zimbabwe on Nov 30, 2022. Previously a minority and elite sport in Zimbabwe, the game has increased in popularity over the years. AP



Levite Chisakarire (center), 18 years old, waits for his turn to play pool on Nov 19, 2022. He was unable to further his education after finishing high school with low grades in 2019. AP



The game has become a survival mode for many in a country where employment is hard to come by. AP

A cue for success?

Zimbabwe's pool players are betting on the sport to make a living

Highlights of the World Cup and other sports events are on widescreen televisions in Ruwa on the outskirts of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. But all eyes are on the pool table ... and the money.

Among them is 18-year-old Levite Chisakarire.

"I have to take the cash home ... there is big money today," he said, holding a pool stick and awaiting his next opponent.

At stake is a \$150 first prize, a princely sum in a country where the majority earn slightly over \$100 a month, according to official government figures, and about half of the 15 million population live in extreme poverty, according to the World Food Program.

"It can go a long way to pay the bills," said the boyish Chisakarire, the youngest player vying for the day's prize.

Previously a minority sport played in Zimbabwe's wealthier neighborhoods, pool has increased in popularity over the years, first as a pastime and now as a survival mode for many in a country where full-time jobs are very hard to come by.

Unable to further his education after finishing high school with low grades in 2019, Chisakarire struggled to find a job in Zimbabwe's stressed industries. The outbreak of COVID-19 meant his father, a truck driver, lost regular work. So Chisakarire began hanging around an illegal tavern where patrons dodged or bribed police to overlook pandemic restrictions so they could drink beer and play pool.

His hobby became a skill and he showed a talent for shooting the round balls into the pockets. Soon it helped solve his financial problems as he began betting on his games and winning. These days he earns about \$300 on a good month by playing pool, he says.

He's not the only one. The majority of Zimbabweans earn a living from informal activities, which include



Levite Chisakarire, 18 years old, lines up his shot while playing pool on the outskirts of Harare, Zimbabwe, on Nov 19, 2022. Chisakarire struggled to find a job in Zimbabwe's stressed industries. AP

selling tomatoes at roadside stands and also by playing pool, according to an October labor survey by the country's statistics agency. About half of young people aged between 15 and 34 are unemployed and not engaged in education or training.

Some, such as Chisakarire, are finding a livelihood at pool tables.

"Pool became popular as a form of entertainment in bars, but it is now proving to be more popular than soccer in many places," said Michael Kariati, a veteran Zimbabwean sports journalist for over 30 years. "It

has evolved into a fiercely competitive sport with people placing bets and surviving off it."

In Harare alone, the number of professional players has quadrupled to about 800 in the past five years, according to Keith Goto, spokesman of the Harare Professional Pool Association.

"Then there are the money games that have grown exponentially. You find pool tables everywhere you go in the townships," he said. "It is offering a form of employment and it is paying through betting."

Others warn that betting is a dangerous habit that can have disastrous impacts on families. But with so many people out of work and Zimbabwe's economic outlook so dire, many people are desperately scrambling to make money through a cue stick.

Makeshift pool arcades flourish in bars, verandas in front of shops, and just about any open space. Some enterprising residents have pool tables at their homes where they charge people 50 cents to play and place bets in violation of city laws

that require such enterprises to be properly licensed. The tables are often worn and wobbly, but people don't seem to care.

In Warren Park, a Harare township, people ignored the country's biggest local soccer derby at the country's biggest stadium nearby to congregate around pool tables where money changed hands fast.

For quick money, betting takes ingenious means. Instead of playing the entire 8-ball game, some bet on the position of the black eight-ball after the first shot of the game, also called the break. Others punt on the best of three balls. One expert player offered to play using only one hand because people were too hesitant to bet against him.

Authorities sometimes carry out so-called clean-up operations to confiscate pool tables scattered all over. Often enforcers of city by-laws are simply paid off with as little as a \$2 bribe to look the other way. Most punters in low-income townships place dollar bets on games in which they can win \$3 or \$4.

In Ruwa, competition is more organized and stakes are higher. Each club member paid \$10 as a participation fee, which went toward the prize money. On a recent day, 31 players paid to participate. Dozens more were spectators, cheering and betting on their favorite players.

"Imagine taking home \$150! That's more than what many gainfully employed people get per month," said Goto, the spokesman. "Pool should now move from bars to schools and community halls like other sports, it has become mainstream after all!"

For Chisakarire, the 18-year-old, pool has become more than a game. From playing and betting in backyard taverns, he is dreaming bigger.

"It has changed my life," he said, before sinking his next ball to win the tournament and pocket \$150. "I can see myself playing in Europe one day."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

CELEBRITY

Ledecky earns AP female athlete of year for second time

A change of scenery worked out just fine for Katie Ledecky.

Shifting coasts and coaches after last summer's Tokyo Olympics, the American swimmer turned in another stellar performance at the world championships, set a pair of world records and capped 2022 as The Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year, selected by a panel of 40 sports writers and editors from news outlets across the country.

Ledecky, who previously won the award in 2017, edged out American track star Sydney McLaughlin in balloting announced Wednesday.

The two tied in total points, but Ledecky got the nod based on 10 first-place votes to McLaughlin's nine. Basketball standout A'ja Wilson finished third.

"I know so many great athletes have won this honor," Ledecky said. "I'm really happy — happy with how my year went, and also excited about the future."

Ledecky, who won her first Olym-

pic gold medal in 2012 at age 15, has managed to stay on top in female freestyle swimming's longest pool events for the better part of a decade.

She has held the long-course world record in both the 800- and 1,500-meter free since 2013, rarely facing a serious challenge in either of those grueling races.

At this year's world aquatics championships in Budapest, Hungary, Ledecky touched first in the 800 by more than 10 seconds and won the 1,500 by nearly 15 seconds. She also claimed gold in the 400 free and was part of the winning U.S. team in the 4x200 free relay.

Before 2022 was done, Ledecky added two more world records to her ledger. She set short-course marks in both the 800 and 1,500 a week apart — even though she rarely competes in the 25m pool.

But the real enjoyment for Ledecky comes when no one is cheering her on, when it's just her

and her coaches and teammates, putting in the long, lonely hours of training.

"I might be one of the few swimmers who loves the training even more than the racing," she said. "Don't get me wrong: I love the racing, too. But I truly enjoy going to practice every day. I'm excited when I go to bed for practice in the morning."

Last year, after an Olympic performance that was a slight disappointment by her lofty standings, Ledecky left coach Greg Meehan and the Stanford University team where she had competed and trained while earning a psychology degree.

Her top priority was getting closer to her family in the Washington, D.C., area. She was intrigued by the program that Anthony Nesty, a rising star in the coaching ranks, had built at the University of Florida.

One of Nesty's freestylers, Bobby Finke, surprisingly swept gold in the

men's 800 and 1,500 free at Tokyo. Another, Kieran Smith, captured an unexpected bronze.

So, Ledecky moved nearly 2,800 miles (4,500 kilometers) from Palo Alto, California, to Gainesville, Florida.

"It's been a lot of fun every day," she said. "This is the right place for me to be at this point in my career. I'm training really well and learning a lot along the way."

The shift to Nesty and a program where she usually trains with the men seems to have pushed the 25-year-old Ledecky to even greater heights.

Nesty said one of his main challenges is making sure Ledecky doesn't train too hard.

"She needs to understand that once you get older, the body is different," the coach said. "I have to tell her, 'Katie, you've got to understand you're not 18 anymore! The body will get tired. When it gets tired, it's OK to throttle back a little bit.'"

Moving to Florida has led to other changes.

Always a bit reserved, Ledecky now seems far more willing to speak up — even holding her own in good-natured trash talk with her male teammates, according to Nesty.

"This group is a very competitive group, a fun group and, at times, pretty chatty," he said. "It seems to have made her pretty chatty. You've gotta be with our group. I think our group has kind of made her come out of her shell a little bit."

Ledecky agreed.

"Guys are guys. They love to trash-talk with each other," she said with a smile. "I'll poke a little fun at some of the guys, give them a little push here and there. I'm definitely pretty comfortable in this environment now."

Ledecky tackled a brutal program at the Tokyo Games, where women competed in the 1,500 free for the first time. As expected, she swept the 800-1,500 double but came up

short to Australian rival Ariarne Titmus in two shorter freestyle events.

Ledecky settled for silver behind Titmus in the 400 and didn't even win a medal in the 200, finishing 1 1/2 seconds behind the Aussie in fifth place.

It was the first time Ledecky failed to win a medal in an Olympic race.

Over three Olympic appearances, she has claimed seven gold medals and three silvers. At the biennial world championships, Ledecky has piled up a staggering 19 gold medals along with three silvers.

She has every intention of going faster.

Ledecky is focused squarely on the 2024 Paris Games, where she'll likely compete in at least four events. She even is glimpsing ahead to her home-country Olympics at Los Angeles in 2028.

She'll be 31 by then but sees no reason why she can't stay on top.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

SPORTS

SOCCER



Fans carry poster with images of Lionel Messi as they cheer for him and his team in Kolkata on Dec 18. AFP



Argentina supporters wear t-shirts displaying portraits of Lionel Messi and late legend Diego Maradona in Lusail on Dec 13. AFP



Fans carry posters with images of Lionel Messi as they cheer for him and his team in Kolkata on Dec 18. AFP

Messi-mania lights up World Cup

How crazy fans from around the world show their passion and love to the Argentina superstar



A Lionel Messi supporter poses with a replica of the FIFA World Cup Trophy before the Qatar 2022 World Cup final match between Argentina and France at Lusail Stadium, north of Doha, on Dec 18. AFP



A Cuban fan of the Argentine national team has his face written before watching the live broadcast of the Qatar 2022 final match between Argentina and France in Havana on Dec 18. AFP



Fans wearing masks of Portugal forward Cristiano Ronaldo and Argentina forward Lionel Messi pose prior to the Qatar 2022 World Cup third place play-off match between Croatia and Morocco. AFP



This picture taken on Dec 18 shows Argentina's supporters watching the Qatar 2022 World Cup final between Argentina and France, in Ternate. AFP



An 18-meter-long Argentina shirt featuring Lionel Messi's surname is displayed at the Monumento a la Bandera in Rosario, Argentina, on Dec 16. REUTERS