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New growth engine

Tech giant Tencent buoyed by its short video platform's performance

BUSINESS, PAGE 9



2023 expected to be rewarding year for tennis hopefuls

SPORTS, PAGE 16



Summit differences

Biden, López Obrador and Trudeau have frank talks

WORLD, PAGE 6

CHINA DAILY

GLOBAL EDITION 中国日報 WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2023

'Acts of terrorism' condemned



A protester is escorted away as a camp of supporters of Brazil's ex-president Jair Bolsonaro, which had been set up in front of the Army headquarters in Brasilia, was dismantled on Monday. Backers of the former president had stormed the country's Congress, presidential palace and Supreme Court on Sunday, in events that led to the arrest of 1,500 people by security forces and that were condemned as "acts of terrorism" by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. MAURO PIMENTEL / AFP **See story, page 7**

Experts: Fast rebound will benefit world

Country's economy expected to bounce back from COVID disruptions by end of first quarter

By ZHOU LANXU
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China's economy is widely expected to rebound by the end of the first quarter as COVID-related disruptions wane, giving a much-needed boost to the ailing global economy, according to international investment banks and asset managers.

A rebound in the world's second-largest economy will help drive the growth of neighboring economies, strengthen global supply chain stability and provide attractive opportunities for international investors, they said.

Inside

See more, page 3

"The speed of China passing the peak of COVID-19 — at least when it comes to the recent wave of infections — is much faster than we previously expected. This means a significant economic upturn may soon take place," said Chen Dong, head of Asia macroeconomic research at Pictet Wealth Management.

China's economic activity may pick up substantially by the end of the first quarter, which will reduce uncertainties related to global supply chains, boost outbound travel and benefit neighboring economies, Chen said.

As some provinces and cities in China have announced that they have passed the peak of the current COVID-19 outbreak, population mobility and economic activity are regaining their momentum, propelling a rally in the Chinese currency and the stock market.

The central parity rate of the renminbi jumped 654 basis points to 6.7611 against the US dollar on Tuesday, reaching its strongest level since mid-August.

In addition, the CSI 300 index, which covers the top 300 stocks traded in Shanghai and Shenzhen, rose for the seventh straight trading session as of Tuesday, closing up 0.11 percent at 4,017.47 points.

Amid weakening global economic and market prospects and tightening campaigns by a number of nations' central banks to curb inflation, the pickup in China's economic fundamentals and its financial markets offers unique opportunities to international institutional investors.

Xu Fei, head of alternatives and multi-asset strategies at Vanguard's Quantitative Equity Group, said that the United States-based asset manager is increasing its exposure to emerging market assets to capitalize on the upside potential offered by Chinese A shares.

China's unfolding economic rebound sharply contrasts with the rising recession risks in major developed economies, thus providing international investors with valuable diversification benefits, Xu said.

Analysts at Morgan Stanley also said in a report on Monday that China may top global equity market performance in 2023.

Given that China's economic activity is recovering from the impact of COVID-19 at a faster pace, they increased the forecast for the nation's GDP growth this year from 5.4 percent to 5.7 percent while also expecting the renminbi to rise to 6.65 against the dollar in the next 12 months.

Stepped-up fiscal and monetary policies will also stabilize China's economic recovery, said Wang Tao, head of Asia economics at UBS Investment Bank, who pointed to the possibility of a further reduction in the reserve requirement ratio — the proportion of money that lenders must hold as reserves, as well as further measures to boost the real estate market by authorities in a number of cities.

Efforts should be made to properly boost credit expansion early this year to deliver "accurate and substantial" support for key areas and weak links, the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, said on Tuesday after holding a meeting with the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission.

Wang said that China's economic recovery is expected to help boost the travel revenue of some neighboring economies and benefit producers of oil and other commodities by propping up related market demand.

Jiang Xueqing contributed to this story.

Top watchdog vows to win tough, protracted battle against corruption

By YANG ZEKUN
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The Communist Party of China's top discipline watchdog has pledged to win the tough and protracted battle against corruption and intensify efforts to uproot graft in sectors with a high concentration of power, funds and resources.

A communique adopted at the second plenary session of the 20th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, which was held in Beijing on Monday and Tuesday, gave a roundup of the achievements of discipline authorities in 2022 and set out the requirements for key tasks this year.

While addressing the session on Monday, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, who is also China's president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, stressed the need for ceaseless efforts to promote full and rigorous Party self-governance and ensure the implementation of decisions and plans made at the 20th CPC National Congress.

The meeting approved a work report delivered by Li Xi, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and head of the CCDI.

The CCDI pledged in the communique that studying and implementing the guiding principles of the 20th CPC National Congress will be the primary political task now and in the near future.

It urged disciplinary authorities to win the tough and protracted battle against corruption, take comprehensive measures to ensure that officials do not have the audacity, opportunity or desire to become corrupt, and take more forceful action to both prevent new cases and root out existing ones.

The authorities must strictly investigate key problems, resolutely investigate and punish corruption that involves both political and economic elements, resolutely prevent leading officials from acting for any interest group or power group, and crack down on any collusion between officials and businesspeople that undermines the political ecosystem or economic development, the communique said.

More crackdowns on corruption will be launched in areas with a high concentration of power, funds and resources, such as the financial field, State-owned enterprises, political and legal affairs, grain purchases and marketing.

*See **Anti-graft**, page 3*

MAINLAND DOMINANCE TO PREVAIL IN TIES ACROSS STRAITS

National sovereignty to be defended, separatist activities combated, observers say

By ZHANG YI
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The Chinese mainland will firmly maintain its strategic dominance to steer cross-Straits relations in the right direction this year, according to observers.

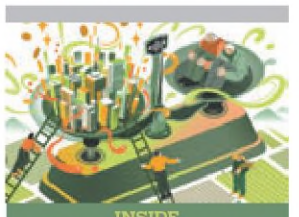
Last year saw turbulence in Taiwan, with unprecedented separatist activities taking place on the island.

In-depth

Tension in the region escalated in August when then-United States house speaker Nancy Pelosi made a high-profile visit to Taiwan, despite repeated warnings from Beijing. The visit openly violated the one-China principle and also angered Chinese people.

The Chinese government took countermeasures following "provocative meddling" in the Taiwan question — China's internal affairs — by conducting military drills around the island and sanctioning "Taiwan independence" separatists who colluded with foreign forces.

*See **Taiwan question**, page 2*



INSIDE
Urbanization of labor force key to boosting economy
Global Views, page 13

China's foreign policy bears much fruit over past year

WORLD WATCH
By Muhammad Asif Noor

The year 2022 was a benchmark in China's foreign policy achievements. It demonstrated a global vision forging ahead with greater resolve to write a new chapter in major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.

The dynamic leadership of the Communist Party of China and President Xi Jinping has played a key role in making the country a globally influential and responsible player.

Xi, who was reelected as general secretary of the CPC Central Committee at the 20th CPC National Congress, has inculcated a bright vision in Chinese foreign policy following the congress. The Chinese leadership has chalked down key policy imperatives to build a community with a shared future by making necessary changes in post-COVID policy and addressing its critical adversities.

In 2022, China hosted the successful Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, at which hundreds of athletes achieved historic legacies amid strict COVID-19 prevention measures. International dignitaries, including 31 heads of state and representatives of international organizations, attended the Games' opening ceremony. China received unprecedented support from the international community to boost its commitment to an inclusive, open and confident China.

At the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021, President Xi proposed the Global Development Initiative, and during the Boao Forum for Asia in April last year, he proposed the Global Security Initiative. Given the global scope of both initiatives, there has been an outstanding response from the global community favoring a developed and secure world, reflecting the trust in the Chinese leadership.

*See **Diplomacy**, page 3*

Warming up for celebrations



A dragon dance troupe practices its moves in Bogor, Indonesia, on Monday, preparing for celebrations of Lunar New Year, which falls on Jan 22. ADITYA AJI / AFP

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PAGE TWO



Taiwan question: Beijing maintains the initiative

A pilot takes part in a drill conducted by the People's Liberation Army around Taiwan island on Aug 7. WANG XINCHAO / XINHUA

From page 1

The tense atmosphere has eased in recent months, especially after President Xi Jinping stressed the importance of the Taiwan question while meeting with US President Joe Biden in November, and with the defeat of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP, in local elections in Taiwan the same month.

Bao Chengke, assistant director at the Institute for East Asian Studies in Shanghai, said these two events had a far-reaching impact on cross-Straits relations by showing that neither the international community nor people in Taiwan accept separatist acts of "Taiwan independence".

However, experts said risks will remain over the Taiwan Straits this year. Conflict could erupt at any time, as factors such as Sino-US strategic competition, a potential visit to Taiwan by new US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, and separatist activities are likely to impact the situation in the region.

Delivering his New Year address on Dec 31, Xi called for cross-Straits efforts to ensure prosperity for the Chinese nation.

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

Looking back at the increasing challenges over the past year, Song Tao, who became head of the mainland's Taiwan affairs authority last month, said, "The Chinese mainland has maintained the initiative and ability to steer cross-Straits relations."

Song, head of the Taiwan Work Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, said efforts were made to effectively deter external forces from using the island to contain the mainland.

"Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, and any attempt to separate Taiwan from China will never succeed," he said, adding that the mainland will continue to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and take firm action against separatist activities and external intervention.

Song made the remarks in a New Year message published in the latest issue of Relations Across Taiwan Straits magazine, calling for joint efforts from both sides of the Straits to safeguard peace and stability.

"On the basis of the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus, we are ready to conduct extensive and in-depth consultations with people of vision from all walks of life in Taiwan on cross-Straits relations and national reunification," he said.

Wrong signals

Bao, the cross-Straits relations expert, said that since the conflict between Russia and Ukraine erupted early last year, the US and other Western countries have attempted to confuse the dispute with the Taiwan question, which is China's domestic affair.

"In the past year, the US has brutally interfered in the Taiwan question to an unprecedented degree since it established diplomatic relations with China," he said.

By sending high-level delegations and members of Congress to visit Taiwan, Washington is conveying the wrong signals to separatist forces on the island and "touching the red line" drawn by the Chinese government on the Taiwan question, he said.

Bao said the military measures taken against Pelosi's visit sent a strong warning to foreign interference forces and "Taiwan independence" forces on the island, adding that although the military exercise in August ended quickly, it had a huge impact.

In an article published recently in Qiushi Journal, the Communist Party of China's flagship magazine, China's senior diplomat Wang Yi said that in adopting the countermeasures China demonstrated its firm determination to protect its sovereignty.

Wang said a total of more than 170 countries and international organizations have expressed strong support for the one-China principle.

Most countries stand with China on the right side of history, and the one-China consensus has been further consolidated in the international community, he added.

Bao said the countermeasures have made the US realize that if it continues to provoke Beijing, this will inevitably lead to a more serious conflict.

During a meeting between Xi and Biden in Bali, Indonesia, in November, Xi stressed that the Taiwan question is "at the very core of China's core interests", while Biden said he did not support "Taiwan independence".

Bao said that although there was a gap between what Biden reiterated in the meeting and actions taken by Washington, the US leader's policy on Taiwan remained clear.

"Biden's stated stance of not supporting 'Taiwan independence' provides an important political foundation for the return of stable Sino-US relations," he added.

Experts said there were positive changes in November, when Taiwan's ruling DPP, which sought confrontation with the mainland, lost in elections for city and county heads, demonstrating that its strategy of seeking "independence" by relying on foreign forces was unpopular with voters.

A recent opinion poll in Taiwan showed that some 47 percent of respondents were satisfied with the election results, while 28 percent were dissatisfied. About 56 percent thought that the DPP would be defeated in the island's leadership election next year.

According to the poll, conducted by Global Views Monthly last month, 59 percent of respondents said there should be more interaction between the two sides of the Straits, while 54 percent said they were not willing to go to war.

Song, head of the mainland's Taiwan affairs authority, said the election results show the pursuit of peace, stability and development is the mainstream view, and "resisting the mainland to protect Taiwan" is an unpopular idea among people on the island.

More Taiwan residents now realize that reunification is the general trend, and peaceful reunification is in the best interests of compatriots on both sides of the Straits and the entire nation, he said.

"As long as compatriots from the two sides work together, they can resolve this family matter," Song added.

Election focus

A number of factors may affect the situation across the Taiwan Straits, including the island's leadership election early next year. Policies on cross-Straits relations and ties with the US are likely to be typical focuses of the campaign.

Cross-Straits tension could also be triggered this year by a potential visit to Taiwan by McCarthy, the new US House Speaker. In July, the Republican House leader said he would visit the island if he was elected as Speaker.

Outlining the cross-Straits situation for the coming year, Tang Yonghong, deputy director of the Taiwan Research Center at Xiamen University, said the contradiction between unification and "independence" on the two sides of the Straits still exists, as well as that between China and the US.

These contradictions might further intensify this year as the US strengthens the strategic containment and suppression of China's development, and competition in Taiwan's leadership election hots up, he said.

Tang said the separatist forces represented by the DPP in Taiwan are certain to promote the concepts of "independence", "sovereignty" and "resisting the mainland" during the election campaign.

Political parties in the US are also likely to continue playing the "Taiwan card" to gain support at home and also obtain interests from Taiwan, he said.

Following Pelosi's visit, the US and Taiwan will continue to collude with each other, and this will include plotting a visit to the island by McCarthy, he added.

To end such provocation, Tang said the mainland will need to take all necessary measures, even at the risk of using force, to resolutely fight separatism and outside interference.

Bao said that faced with such a complex and volatile situation across the Straits, "the mainland will firmly maintain strategic dominance and use all possible means to prevent the situation from getting out of control."

He said that to implement the CPC's overall strategy for solving the Taiwan question in the New Era, which was mapped out at the Party's 20th National Congress in October, the mainland will further advance the process of peaceful reunification between the two sides.

It will also unite with compatriots in Taiwan in opposing secession, and is prepared to smash any attempts at independence made by separatist forces on the island, he said.







Top: A man from Taiwan stands in the souvenir shop he owns in Pingtan, Fujian province. LIN SHANCHUAN / XINHUA **Above left:** An embroidery expert explains the traditional craft to visitors from Taiwan in Suzhou, Jiangsu province. HUA XUEGEN / FOR CHINA DAILY **Above right:** Young people from Taiwan operate a bar in Xiamen, Fujian. WEI PEIQUAN / XINHUA

Factbox

March 16: A policy is introduced to allow people in Taiwan to register individually owned businesses in 122 sectors on the Chinese mainland, including fruit planting, beverage manufacturing, pet services and entertainment agencies.

July 11: Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, sends a letter replying to young people from Taiwan who attended the 20th Straits Youth Forum in Xiamen, Fujian province. Xi calls for young people from both sides of the Taiwan Straits to join hands in realizing the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation.

July 26: A symposium is held in Beijing to mark the 30th anniversary of the 1992 Consensus, which embodies the one-China principle. Officials and experts attending the event stress that the Consensus is the basis for peaceful development of cross-Straits relations.

Aug 2: United States House Speaker Nancy Pelosi arrives in Taiwan by military aircraft for a two-day trip, during which she meets the island's leader Tsai Ing-wen. The Chinese government takes unprecedented countermeasures due to Pelosi's trip, including canceling three cooperative dialogues or meetings with US defense authorities, suspending climate talks, and conducting live-fire drills around Taiwan.

Aug 10: A white paper titled The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era is published. It elaborates the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government's position, principles and policies for advancing and realizing national reunification in the New Era.

Aug 16: The mainland sanctions seven "Taiwan independence" diehards, including Hsiao Bi-khim, the island's "representative" to the US who promoted Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, in addition to three DPP politicians already on the list. Punitive measures include barring enterprises related to these people, as well as their sponsors, from engaging in profit-making activities on the mainland.

In October: The report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC stresses that the mainland will implement the Party's overall policy for resolving the Taiwan question in the New Era. Resolutely opposing and deterring separatists who seek "Taiwan independence" is added to the Party's Constitution during the Congress.

Nov 14: President Xi Jinping tells US President Joe Biden during their meeting in Bali, Indonesia, that the Taiwan question is at the very core of China's core interests, the bedrock of the political foundation for China-US relations, and the "first red line" that must not be crossed in Sino-US ties.

Nov 26: Defeated in local elections, Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party wins only five out of 21 positions for county and city chiefs. Tsai Ing-wen resigns as the party's chair to take responsibility for the poor performance.

Dec 23: Biden signs an $858 billion defense spending bill into law, authorizing up to US$10 billion in security assistance and fast-tracked weapons procurement for Taiwan.

— ZHANG YI

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TOP NEWS

New areas for growth of job market sought

Employment-first policy will be strengthened and entrepreneurship supported, minister says

By **CHENG SI**
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China will maintain a stable employment landscape in 2023 by continuing to implement the employment-first policy and energizing people's passion for entrepreneurship in order to develop new growth points in the job market.

In November, the nation surpassed the year's target of creating 11 million new jobs, with about 12.06 million people landing jobs in urban areas. The encouraging achievement, which came despite economic challenges and a resurgence of COVID-19 cases, was due to the recovering economy and support policies in the fiscal, monetary and employment sectors.

Wang Xiaoping, minister of human resources and social security, said in a recent interview with China Central Television that the nation sustained a stable job market last year, with the employment of college graduates and other key groups — primarily migrant workers and demobilized military members — maintaining good performance. In addition, the number of formerly impoverished people finding jobs increased, she said.

Wang also said that "policies and follow-up measures for stabilizing the economy have driven the economy to recover and helped industries to develop (in 2022), which has given strong support to the growth of employment."

As of November, deferral of a total of 116.2 billion yuan ($17.1 billion) in social security fees, such as pension security and work-related injury insurance payments, was allowed in order to help companies retain job positions, she added.

The nation has also created a more friendly environment for entrepreneurs and stepped up efforts to secure the working rights of the flexibly employed, Wang said.

For example, Huzhou, Zhejiang province, released a guideline near the end of the year on protecting the working rights of flexible workers. It called for improving such workers' sense of happiness and safety by optimizing the government's guidance and enhancing flexible workers' skills training and social security. So far, 18,275 workers, or around 44 percent of the city's flexibly employed, are included in the social security net.

Meanwhile, in 2022, the ministry's employment services were used more than 100 million times, and working skills training programs were used over 16 million times.

Wang said her ministry will continue to implement the employment-first policy in 2023 and make every effort to stabilize the job market by setting a target of developing high-quality employment.

She said this is of great importance to energizing people's passion for entrepreneurship in order to incubate new growth points for the job market.

"We will keep promoting the employment of key groups and establish a group of pioneer zones for startup incubation," she said.

"It's necessary to stabilize the employment of college graduates and help unemployed young people to reenter the market as soon as possible. We will improve employment services and carry out training campaigns to relieve the structural imbalance of the job market. Regulating the job market is also important, including cracking down on fraudulent agencies and addressing gender bias to better secure workers' rights."

Wang said that the ministry will prioritize college graduates' finding jobs. The employment of graduates, whose population is projected to reach 11.58 million this year, matters much to the fulfillment of their personal value and the happiness of their families, as well as the nation's high-quality economic development, she said.

The ministry will help create more job openings for college graduates by granting allowances to companies and encouraging government bodies to offer job opportunities, Wang said. In addition, the ministry will organize skills training campaigns for college graduates and help them get internships with companies.



A job seeker talks with a recuitment officer at a job fair on Saturday in Hefei, Anhui province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Anti-graft: Supervision of leading officials to intensify

From page 1

Attention should also be paid to key discipline inspection targets, including corruption cases that involve leading officials' spouses, their children, children's spouses, other relatives, or staff who use their power to seek personal gain, said the communique.

New and hidden forms of corruption must be resolutely investigated, it said, adding that the authorities should increase punishment for bribe givers to foster and promote a favorable atmosphere for upholding integrity and resisting corruption.

The document also urged improving the systems and regulations for the Party's self-reform, intra-Party rules and regulations, and promoting national anti-corruption legislation to constantly improve the system of disciplinary inspection and supervision regulations.

Disciplinary authorities were also asked to strengthen supervision of leading officials who were urged to be strict with themselves and fulfill their responsibilities.

The document also stressed the importance of continuing to deepen the implementation of the "eight-point decision on improving conduct", tackling formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism and extravagance, and seriously rectifying acts of hedonism and extravagance that damage the Party's image or cause a strong reaction from the public.

Disciplinary authorities must prevent these problems from returning, and prevent hidden and disguised forms of such problems

Classes continue



Children displaced by flooding take a class on Monday in a mobile school near a makeshift camp in the flood-hit Dera Allah Yar area of Pakistan's Jaffarabad district in Balochistan province. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Friday for "massive investments" to help Pakistan recover from last year's devastating floods and better resist climate change, as financial pledges poured in.
FIDA HUSSAIN / AFP

Spring Festival travel rush lifts spirits of civil aviation sector

By **LUO WANGSHU**
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4.83 m
passenger trips
are expected during Spring Festival at Beijing Capital International Airport.

11,000
flights
have been scheduled nationwide on average each day of the holiday travel period, about 73 percent of the volume during the same period in 2019.

Inside

Comment, **page 12**

Amid China's recently optimized COVID-19 management policy, the Spring Festival travel rush is buoying the country's civil aviation sector, which had been hit hard by the pandemic in the past three years.

During the 40-day holiday travel period, which began on Saturday and is expected to continue till Feb 15, more flights are planned, services onboard and at airports will be improved and routine disinfection carried out for better epidemic control.

About 11,000 flights have been scheduled on average each day of the holiday travel period, about 73 percent of the volume during the same period in 2019, according to Wan Xiangdong, chief pilot of the Civil Aviation Administration of China.

Spring Festival starts on Jan 22, and the travel rush is expected to peak before and after the seven-day celebrations, as well as after Lantern Festival, which falls on Feb 5. Popular flight routes include Beijing to Sanya, Hainan province; Beijing to Shanghai; Beijing to Haikou, Hainan; Shenzhen, Guangdong province, to Kunming, Yunnan province; Shenzhen to Chongqing; Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, to Kunming.

Airline companies are being encouraged to schedule more domestic flights, if possible, to meet the increasing demand for travel on routes such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, to Sanya, Haikou, Chengdu, Sichuan province, and Chongqing, Wan said.

As of Thursday, he said, the civil aviation administration had approved the addition of 10,313 domestic flights for the holiday travel period. A total of 3,459 flights, which is about one-third of the volume of added services, will cater to the needs of passengers flying to and from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Wan said the flight schedules will be adjusted according to passenger demands and changes in weather to reduce inconveniences caused by flight delays and cancellations.

For effective epidemic control, service providers and airport authorities will urge passengers to avoid crowds, offer contact-free services, boost health management of staff and regularly disinfect key areas. Services will be improved for passengers with special needs, the elderly and unaccompanied minors at airports and onboard flights.

Passenger trips are expected to surge during the festival period. On Saturday, Sunday and Monday, the first three days of the Spring Festival travel rush, the civil aviation sector respectively handled 976,000, 1.07 million and 1.06 million passenger trips, year-on-year increases of 24.9 percent, 34.5 percent and 30.3 percent, according to the Ministry of Transport.

The numbers were still respectively 41.3 percent, 36.1 percent and 39.3 percent lower than the passenger trips recorded during the same period in 2019, the ministry's data showed.

Beijing Capital International Airport, one of the busiest in China, is expected to handle 4.83 million passenger trips and 39,000 flights during the holiday travel period. Peak days are expected to fall on Jan 20 and 27, with about 146,000 and 142,000 passenger trips.

The airport has set up more channels at the security gate to improve efficiency and reduce waiting times, especially for passengers with special needs. More than 4,000 USB charging points have been installed in the waiting lounge at Terminal-3.

Beijing Daxing International Airport will resume international flight operations on Jan 17. These have been suspended since March 2020 due to COVID-19. The airport is following all epidemic control and passenger safety protocols.

Air China plans to operate more flights during the holiday period. The airline will provide 58,633 flights to ease the travel rush, up 75.9 percent compared with last year.

Optimized COVID-19 travel measures, which include lifting of quarantine and testing requirements, have boosted the civil aviation sector's confidence. Last year, the sector handled 250 million passenger trips, roughly 38 percent of the volume in 2019.

Diplomacy: Nation presents its vision of multilateralism

From page 1

UN members supported the Global Development Initiative, with nearly 70 member states joining the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative.

Since China is an overachiever on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, it carries immense experience, a diplomatic footprint, capital and human resources to make concrete contributions to global development. The case is no different with the Global Security Initiative, as Xi believes in mutual security and multilateral peace, guaranteeing a shared, peaceful and sustainable future.

Xi has undertaken four significant Asia visits recently. During these important regional engagements, he participated in the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the APEC leaders' meeting in Bangkok and the G20 Summit in Bali, and he made a state visit to Saudi Arabia.

These various engagements enabled China to present its vision of multilateralism, rejecting any notions of confrontation or zero-sum competition. Xi tends to lead by example and negates coercion to win alliances or interference in the internal affairs of other states.

The Chinese position is that diplomatic engagement is based on mutual respect, trust, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation. ... China has made substantial headway in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. It has urged the world to shun all differences and unite to fight this menace.

Meanwhile, the US-China relationship remains a concern of every major stakeholder in the international system for several reasons. The US, in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, National Security Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review, has taken an offensive posture against China and is trying to disrupt Chinese growth. This Cold War mentality is rejected by China. These policies further intend to force a blockade of Chinese trade, suppress the economy and provoke China militarily. The politics of Western alliances come at the expense of global growth, peace, sustainability and security. This divisive behavior is intended to create polarization and invoke distraction from the primary goals of growth and development of an already strained global economy.

The US and China have made substantial connections during 2022. President Xi and US President Joe Biden had two phone calls last year and a face-to-face meeting in Bali. Xi took the opportunity to explain the Chinese understanding of US actions while drawing parameters and red lines. He urged Biden to abandon the zero-sum mentality that leads to confrontation.

The Chinese position is that diplomatic engagement is based on mutual respect, trust, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation. The communication between Xi and Biden covered all issues of strategic importance, followed by a commitment to explore and build guiding principles for the bilateral relationship.

In addition to all the feathers in its cap and the resounding success of its foreign policy, China has made substantial headway in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. It has urged the world to shun all differences and unite to fight this menace.

Due to this challenge, humanity faces growing threats of recession, poverty and inflation, and China is playing a constructive role in building the global economy. The nation has the prerequisite elements to take the lead through the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative to create better living conditions for people and a favorable operating environment for developing states.

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

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CHINA

Tender care



Medical workers tend to a patient with a severe COVID-19 infection at Shanxi Bethune Hospital in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, on Monday. A recent increase in severe cases has placed more pressure on the medical sector. WEI LIANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Monitoring of virus to remain, city official says

Despite Class B downgrade, analysis of transmission, mutations to continue

By **DU JUAN**
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In the wake of COVID-19 being managed as a Class B infectious disease, Beijing will establish a new scientific monitoring and warning system for its epidemic control and prevention, a senior official in the capital said on Monday.

Yin Yong, the acting mayor of Beijing, said the city has passed its infection peak and will now conduct regular nucleic acid sampling in society to monitor the ways in which the coronavirus spreads.

"The impact of new variants will also be assessed," he said during an interview with China Media Group.

The monitoring and warning system covers detection and monitoring in many areas, including residential nucleic acid and antigen tests, COVID-19 cases in medical institutions, the community infection level, the nucleic acid tests of entry personnel, COVID-19 etiology, symptoms among the student population and sewage monitoring, Li Ang, deputy head of the Beijing Health Commission, said at a news conference last week.

Through the system, the authority can assess the risks of the COVID-19 epidemic in a timely manner and take prevention and control measures accordingly, Li said.

In late December, the Beijing Health Commission said all districts in the city should conduct surveys among elderly residents with underlying diseases and perform graded health management.

Yin said during the interview that special attention would be given to the elderly, people with underlying diseases, children, pregnant women and disabled people to lower their infection risks.

"Hospitals at the community level will provide oxygen therapy to the elderly with low blood oxygen. Meanwhile, Beijing will continue to promote vaccination and take preventive measures for people at risk of critical illness," he added.

Community hospitals have distributed pulse oximeters to the elderly and other high-risk groups.

> "Beijing will continue to promote vaccination and take preventive measures for people at risk of critical illness."
>
> **Yin Yong,** acting mayor of Beijing

According to its acting mayor, Beijing will develop and improve its medical service system, including its emergency transfers, outpatient and emergency reception services, the treatment of critical illnesses and a grade-based medical system.

"Grassroots medical institutions play a key role in COVID-19 prevention and control because of their proximity to those in need. Therefore, Beijing will continue to offer more medical resources to primary hospitals," Yin said.

Beijing will enhance support to rural and community medical centers by assigning them to designated medical facilities in an effort to encourage people to go to grassroots medical institutions, according to a document released by the Beijing Medical Insurance Bureau on Sunday.

It said 90 percent of all outpatient and emergency treatment costs for patients with suspected symptoms of COVID-19 can be reimbursed from the municipal government before April 1, if the treatment was administered from a Grade 2 and lower level designated medical institution.

Guo Changling, 68, recently received treatment at Dongfeng Community Hospital in Chaoyang district.

"I have not been to any other major hospitals for years because the community hospital has been able to meet all of my medical requirements," he said.

Wang Songsong contributed to this story.

Villagers pitch in to ensure harvest

By **LIU KUN** in Wuhan
and **ZHOU HUIYING**

With the help of 30 workers, Peng Qianjin has managed to harvest half of the navel oranges in his orchard and meet demand in the peak sales period for the upcoming Spring Festival.

"In December, people around here began to show COVID-19 symptoms one after another, bringing a sudden labor shortage for the orange harvest season," said Peng, 47, a farmer from Pengjiapo village in Hubei province. Peng and his wife were also infected with COVID-19 in late December.

Peng has grown oranges in the village for over two decades and expected a harvest of around 30 metric tons of the fruit this year.

"As my wife and I gradually recovered, we began to worry about the harvest," he said, adding that workers from nearby villages came to help them.

"Teams from different villages helped us meet the demand for picking," said Li Qiang, Party secretary of Pengjiapo village.

"Around 60 percent of the villagers have been infected so far," he said. "To make sure everyone can manage, we sent out 200 health packages and made fever drugs available from the village clinic."

Peng, who is grateful for such coordination amid infections and a labor shortage, said: "With a good market this winter, I can sell my oranges for around 6 yuan (89 cents) a kilogram. The profit can increase by 40,000 yuan from that of 2021."

Known as the "hometown of oranges in China", Zigui county, where Pengjiapo village is located, has more than 26,600 hectares of orange orchards.

"We expect to bring in an annual yield of 800,000 tons of oranges, half of which will be harvested in the winter harvest season," said Zhang Guangguo, an expert from the county's agriculture bureau. "So far, 320,000 tons of oranges have been sold.

"Officials of townships and villages are actively guiding surplus labor from high mountain areas to work in relevant e-commerce and citrus processing enterprises to ensure their normal operation," he said.

There are more than 300 professional fruit-picking teams and social organizations working on the harvest in Zigui, he said.

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Clinics help with post-COVID rehab

By **XU XIAOMIN** in Shanghai
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Several Shanghai hospitals have opened special clinics aimed at helping people address common health issues like fatigue, cough and sore throat that persist even after their antigen tests for COVID-19 have turned negative.

Among the medical institutions that have done so is the Children's Hospital of Shanghai. Jiang Kun, chief physician of the respiratory department of the hospital, said the clinic opened on Jan 4 after the hospital found that there were still some children suffering from symptoms even though they no longer tested positive.

The clinic, which is open on Wednesday and Sunday mornings, was fully booked on the first day of operations.

Jiang said doctors at the clinic conduct a comprehensive evaluation of patients' health conditions before designing customized rehabilitation plans.

The Children's Hospital of Fudan University in Shanghai has also set up an immunity evaluation clinic for children who've contracted COVID-19. The main aim of the clinic is to provide scientific consultation and treatment by evaluating patients' immunity after infection for at least two weeks.

"The immune system plays an important role in fending off the virus. It is also one of the key factors affecting the prognosis," said Wang Xiaochuan, director of the immunity department of the hospital. "A small number of children will develop multisystem inflammatory syndrome after infection, and this might cause immunity-related issues."

The syndrome is a rare but serious condition associated with the novel coronavirus, and Wang said doctors need to pay closer attention to post-COVID conditions.

The Shanghai No 7 People's Hospital told local news portal ThePaper.cn that it opened a special clinic for post-COVID rehabilitation for adults on Jan 1, after discovering that some of its patients still had symptoms such as a lingering cough and breathing problems after turning negative. Some have even developed problems including insomnia and anxiety.

The clinic said its rehab plan revolves around improving cardiopulmonary function as well as physical and mental health while restoring balance to the immune system. The rehab also includes evaluations on cardiopulmonary capacity, mental well-being and sleep quality.

Some medical institutions have leveraged traditional Chinese medicine therapies to help people fully recover.

The Children's Hospital of Shanghai has set up a traditional Chinese medicine clinic for post-COVID rehab.

Operated by the hospital's TCM department, the clinic offers online and in-person consultations, as well as TCM treatments such as massage, acupuncture, moxibustion and diet therapy.

Some community clinics also offer TCM therapies, such as the Dinghai Community Clinic in Yangpu district. Chen Xiaoyan, a TCM physician, said the clinic has prescribed TCM therapies for over 300 people since late December. Most of these, she noted, were suffering from post-COVID-19 symptoms such as fatigue and shortness of breath.

"TCM considers the different causes that may exist behind the same symptoms and we TCM practitioners need to tell what is causing the symptoms and give precise treatment. This is the core concept of TCM practitioners in treating post-COVID-19 symptoms," Chen said.

Chen said that since early last year, the hospital has been researching ways to prevent, treat and rehabilitate COVID-19 patients. In addition to medical prescriptions, the hospital also provides them with dietary recommendations and breathing exercises to help with a full recovery.

Public responds to call for blood donations

By **YUAN HUI** in Hohhot
and **ZHAO RUIXUE** in Jinan

When Jia Zengguang, a business owner in Weihai, Shandong province learned that blood and platelet donations were critically needed, he took a high-speed train to Jinan on Dec 31 and donated two doses of platelets.

"There was no need to hesitate," said the 32-year-old Jia, who has been donating blood and platelets regularly during the past decade.

"Jinan, as the province's capital, has a bigger demand for blood than other cities," he said.

Jia is not alone. Growing numbers of people are rolling up their sleeves at blood donation centers.

The reasons for a previous decline in the number of blood donors included COVID-19, seasonal illnesses like cold and influenza, and chilly weather, according to notices calling for donations.

January is the hardest month for Hohhot in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, said Zhang Shuo, director of the region's blood bank.

"In January, Hohhot needs 150 units of blood every day, which requires 100 to 120 people to donate," said Zhang.

On the Chinese mainland, each unit represents 200 millimeters of blood. People can donate one or two units.

On Dec 28, a request for blood donations for a 9-month-old boy who was receiving medical treatment for leukemia in Hohhot went viral.



Medical workers and administrative personnel donate blood at a blood donation bus in Dongyang, Zhejiang province, on Tuesday. BAO KANGXUAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

The boy's father, Li Yue, 28, was desperate for help and so published a video online. His cry was heard, and people rushed to donate for the boy within two days.

Many warmhearted residents came to help, the father said, adding that a stranger donated twice for his boy and even donated the 100 yuan ($15) he received from the blood center for nutrition.

Li was grateful but expressed his concern that his boy needs regular donations and that he continues to call on people for the next transfusions.

Wu Xiandeng, a doctor at Jinan Second People's Hospital, donated 400 milliliters on Jan 2.

"My wife told me my blood type A is critically needed, and she encouraged me to donate," said Wu.

"We are doing everything we can to increase blood donations to ensure patients can receive timely medical treatments. And more people are needed," said Geng Xiufeng, who works at the information office of the Jinan blood supply center.

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Hebei doctors reach out to assist rural residents

By **ZHANG YU** in Shijiazhuang
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Thousands of rural doctors in the city of Baoding in North China's Hebei province have been mobilized to provide consultations in rural areas to catch and treat COVID-19 infections as early as possible, according to the city government.

"There are many elderly people with underlying diseases and it's not convenient for them to go out to see a doctor when they're not feeling well," said Yang Pengcheng, a doctor at a clinic in the village of Zhujiayu in Baoding's Quyang county.

Since early December, Yang and 11 other doctors have formed teams carrying out household consultations to regularly check up on those aged 65 and above so that they receive the appropriate treatment if infected with COVID-19.

"Doctor Yang visited me every day after I got infected and treated my persistent cough," said Wang Tiangang, a 72-year-old Zhujiayu resident with high blood pressure and diabetes.

The doctor would check his basic health condition, including his heart rate and oxygen saturation, and tell him when and how often to take medications, Wang said.

"I am greatly relieved by the doctor's care and attention because I was worried I would develop a more severe illness without knowing it," Wang said. He has since recovered from the infection.

Apart from providing medical consultations, the teams are also studying and reporting the health conditions of elderly patients to central health authorities so that transfers can be made if required, according to Liao Jihai, head of the community health department at the Baoding health bureau.

"Our teams have covered all the villages and communities in Baoding," he said.

The city has mobilized some 18,000 doctors into more than 5,000 medical service teams together with civil servants in villages and communities.

The teams provide door-to-door medical consultations to households in need, and services include spreading health awareness, psychological counseling, follow-up visits and delivery of medicine.

Similar measures are being taken in other places in Hebei, including in the cities of Langfang and Handan.

Top officials in Hebei have demanded that COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control work in rural areas be enhanced and that adequate medical resources be supplied, according to a meeting held at the end of December.

"As we cope with COVID-19, we will put the people and their lives above all else and try our best to protect their health," Liao said.

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CHINA

Emerging sectors drive new laws, amendments

Legislators and judicial professionals are mulling ways to deal with questions prompted by the rise of internet- and tech-related businesses. **Cao Yin** reports.



A cross-border saleswoman uses a livestream to sell crystal accessories in Lianyungang, Jiangsu province, last month. ZHANG ZHENGYOU / FOR CHINA DAILY

Will the act of broadcasting movies or television programs via livestreams be considered an infringement of copyright protection law? Will ride-hailing drivers be compensated by online platforms if their rights are infringed by work-related injuries? How can personal information be protected in this era of big data?

These and a number of other related legal issues have sprung up as a result of the rapid development of emerging tech-based businesses in China. They have become a major part of advancing the rule of law and also brought new challenges for judicial professionals.

Li Zongsheng, a lawyer from Liaoning province, attaches great importance to these new issues.

"Problems concerning new fields — such as data security, cybersecurity, the platform economy, livestreaming, express delivery — are closely related to every resident and are inseparable from the nation's sustainable growth," he said.

Li, who is a deputy to the National People's Congress, China's top legislative body, added that it is essential to respond to public concerns via the rule of law.

"Only in this way can the new industries be regulated so as to further promote the healthy development of industry and improve people's sense of security, fulfillment and happiness," he said.

In October, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, delivered a report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC. He highlighted the significance of practicing law-based governance on all fronts and advancing the rule of law.

He also stressed the need to follow the path of socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics, emphasizing that it is vital to give greater play to its role in consolidating foundations, ensuring stable expectations and delivering long-term benefits.

He also called for a greater focus on legislation in key emerging fields and those related to business overseas, adding that it is essential to improve governance and development through sound legislation.

Legislative steps

During the past decade, the NPC and its standing committee have stepped up efforts to produce laws that will prevent problems in emerging industries.

For example, since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, legislators have drafted and revised more than 20 laws related to areas of non-traditional security including the cybersecurity law, the data security law, the e-commerce law and the personal information protection law.

"The new laws and amendments aim to solve fresh security problems facing the country and also form a national security legal system that suits the State's strategic security environment," said Xu Anbiao, deputy head of the NPC Standing Committee's Legislative Affairs Commission.

After many people fell victim to telecom and online fraud, legislators strengthened punishments for swindlers by revising the criminal law and also introduced the nation's first law focused on fraud-related cases.

"We've also provided heavier penalties and added new criminal charges while revising the criminal law in response to people's concerns in other fields, such as corruption, financial security, public security, food safety, environmental protection and intellectual property," Yue Zhongming, a spokesman for the commission, said.

Li, the lawyer in Liaoning, welcomed the new measures, but added that making or amending laws is a lengthy process that sometimes fails to keep pace with new issues "so solving problems involving emerging businesses presents challenges to legal practice".

Seeking a balance

In 2021, Li Lisha, a judge at the Beijing Haidian District People's Court, resolved a copyright case in which iQiyi, a leading online video platform, claimed that a user of Huya, a provider of streaming services, had privately broadcast one of its works, *Nirvana in Fire*, a domestic costume drama, via an illegal livestream.

The person responsible was easily identified as a copyright violator because evidence showed that he had failed to obtain permission from iQiyi to broadcast the drama.

"However, whether Huya should be held liable for the infringement was an issue that needed further consideration," Li Lisha said.

After an investigation, the court clarified Huya's liability status and ordered the company to pay iQiyi compensation of about 230,000 yuan ($33,400) as it should have been aware of the infringement and taken action to stop it.

"We found that the violator received abundant online views after broadcasting the drama for almost a month on a special channel established by Huya for people to watch TV series and movies," the judge said.

"Although the livestreaming room was named after actors in the drama instead of directly using the name of the TV series, Huya should have noticed the infringement due to the large number of views and the monthly playtime. In other words, Huya assisted the infringement, so it should be punished."

However, she said whether an online service provider is held accountable mainly depends on whether it performs its management duties correctly and has the ability to identify irregularities on its platform.

"The problem concerning emerging sectors like livestreaming has been frequently seen in cases related to IP (intellectual property)," she said, adding that the big challenge is to solve issues via the existing laws, which have few provisions targeting emerging industries. She conceded that such new-style disputes raise new requirements for the judiciary.

"They demand that we better balance the interests of all parties when delivering a verdict," she said.

"Simply put, we cannot hamper the potential driving force of new businesses while regulating them, nor can we ignore the interests of the holders of the rights."

Research rising

Data released by the National Bureau of Statistics last year show that about 200 million people in China were in flexible employment, with a rising number engaged in new sectors, such as express delivery, ride-hailing services and livestreaming.

Wang Yan, another judge at the Beijing court, always follows the statistics, saying it is a must for judicial professionals to embrace the internet. "The more we understand about how online services work, the more effectively we can resolve related disputes," she said.

In a case Wang handled in 2018, a woman surnamed Ge, who was working as a driver for a ride-hailing company, lost consciousness as she responded to an order to pick up a customer at 11:50 pm on Sept 30 that year. Having lost control, Ge was killed when her car collided with other vehicles.

Her family members claimed that Ge's death was work-related, and applied for compensation from the company. However, it refused on the grounds that it didn't have an employer-employee relationship with Ge.

Unable to reach an agreement, the two sides turned to the court.

An investigation by the court found that Ge had not signed an employment contract with the platform, and under the business operating model she had the right to decide when to start providing her services and whether to accept orders assigned by the platform.

Wang said that meant the platform could not force Ge to provide the services, but it could lower her customer scores through an algorithm if she consistently declined assigned orders. The lower scores would make it difficult for her to receive orders later on.

Based on the findings, the court identified a flexible labor relationship between Ge and the platform, rather than stable, long-term employment in which workers are strictly managed by employers and receive pay or medical insurance if they have work-related injuries.

Although the relationship could not be legally proved, Wang said in her ruling that the improper approach of the service — lowering scores provided by customers if drivers refused to accept assigned jobs — should be noted.

She called on the platform to shoulder more responsibility by improving its business operations and to optimize the service pattern to further protect people's personal safety and traffic safety.

She noted that new sectors have played a major role in advancing sustainable and high-quality economic growth "but that doesn't mean they can develop in a disorderly fashion".

She added that the healthy development of new industries contributes to promoting employment and maintaining social stability. That means judges need to conduct more research on cases involving such sectors, especially those that use algorithms and related operating models because that would help identify the root causes of disputes.

NPC deputy Li Zongsheng agreed, saying that such studies would help advance legislation. "People's rights and interests will be better protected if a sound legal environment can be established," he said.

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From left: A ride-hailing driver uses three smartphones to receive orders in Shanghai. WANG GANG / FOR CHINA DAILY Women sell jackets via a livestream in Liaocheng, Shandong province. ZHANG ZHENXIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY Workers process packages for delivery in Shijiazhuang, Hebei province, last month. JIA MINJIE / FOR CHINA DAILY

National and local rules forging fresh regulatory environment

By CAO YIN

While national-level legislation involving emerging industries is currently being promoted, local regulations to help solve problems in new sectors have been formulated in recent years, according to official reports.

Last month, an annual report on the rule of law in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, showed that the formulation of rules overseeing emerging industries was made a top priority last year by the Shenzhen people's congress and its standing committee, the local legislative body.

In response to people's concerns about the protection of personal information and the development of the digital industry, the legislature produced a data regulation that restricted the processing of biometric data and regulated the use of services that employ facial-recognition technology, which could pose security risks.

Although it strengthens data security monitoring and allows people to initiate public-interest lawsuits if they discover that their personal information is being used improperly, the regulation also requires the reasonable use of public data to promote the growth of the digital industry.

After some disorderly conduct involving bike-sharing services, the Shenzhen legislature made a regulation that imposed certain provisions on the total number of bikes offered, operating models, service charges, parking and maintenance to help ensure the healthy development of the industry.

The standing committee of the Shanghai people's congress, the city's legislative body, has also attached importance to dealing with problems related to new businesses through the formulation of regulations, according to a report by the Shanghai Observer, a local news outlet.

In 2021, the city's legislature passed the country's first provincial-level data regulation, providing legal support for data-driven innovation and the urban digital transformation, the report said.

Last year, the legislature began formulating a regulation on advancing the development of artificial intelligence in order to make Shanghai a global hot spot for AI, it said.

Meanwhile, according to the bureau of justice in Hefei, capital of Anhui province, a guideline to improve the quality of service for express delivery and postal businesses came into effect in the city in November to ensure that parcels are delivered in an orderly, efficient way, especially during online shopping galas.

It revealed that about 30 percent of legislative items promoted in the city last year focused on emerging businesses, noting that relevant industry surveys and studies have been conducted by lawmakers and government departments.

The authority praised the achievements of people who provide internet-based services — such as those who work with online food orders, goods delivery and ride-hailing platforms — but it pointed out security risks and responsibility loopholes in those fields, adding that they would not help to promote the industry's development or protect employees' legitimate rights.

In addition to local and regional legislative bodies, the Supreme People's Court, China's top court, has stepped up efforts to provide stronger protection for people who work in new industries.

In July, the court said it had started drafting judicial interpretations on handling civil disputes involving emerging businesses.

Early last year, it also issued a guideline on the resolution of cases concerning online purchases, clarifying that consumers can ask for internet platforms and sellers to be held accountable if the items they buy through livestreamed promotions are of poor quality or prove to be problematic.

To clean up the online consumption environment and guarantee the healthy development of livestreaming, the Cyberspace Administration of China, the nation's top internet regulator, said in 2021 that such businesses should open channels to allow people to report violations and also establish blacklists to stop violators starting similar businesses again.

Zhao Zhanling, a lawyer with the Yunjia Law Firm in Beijing, applauded the closer scrutiny and joint efforts to regulate new businesses such as livestreaming, adding that their futures depend on whether risks, problems and irregularities can be identified and combated in a timely manner.

He said the strict implementation of laws and regulations is a necessity, and suggested that more entities, including government departments, judicial agencies and social organizations, join a supervisory team to strengthen the regulation of emerging industries.

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WORLD

Marcos trip strengthens China ties

Philippine president's state visit also shows value of engagement, analysts say

By **PRIME SARMIENTO**
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The state visit of Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr to China has strengthened diplomatic relations and reaffirmed the importance of Manila's commitment to an independent foreign policy, analysts said.

This is especially crucial as there were straining voices in the past over the South China Sea. But Marcos, who assumed the presidency in June 2022, has declared that the Philippines "is a friend to all and an enemy to none". Such an approach toward foreign policy, analysts said, is needed to look at the bigger picture.

Anna Malindog-Uy, vice-president for external affairs at the Asian Century Philippines Strategic Studies Institute, said that one of the "most critical political gains" of Marcos' first state visit to China is the agreement between the two sides to move forward on an arrangement for the establishment of a communication mechanism on maritime issues, between the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to avoid any possible mistakes and misunderstandings.

Malindog-Uy said that despite the Philippines' differences with China over the South China Sea, Manila does not view China as "an adversary but instead as a good friend and neighbor".

"This means we are engaging with China ... maintaining close, cooperative and friendly relations with it, while putting utmost priority on the country's national interests above all else," she told China Daily.

Aaron Jed Rabena, research fellow at the Manila-based think tank Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress, said Marcos' visit is "strategically important" and showed that the Philippines is keen to have a "civil relationship" with China.

Rabena said in an online forum that the Philippines recognizes "China's profile as a great power". He described Marcos' visit as "pragmatic" as China is an important economic partner for the Philippines.

Marcos visited Beijing from Jan 3 to 5 at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Marcos was the first foreign head of state that China received in 2023. The trip also marked Marcos' first visit to a nonmember state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as president.

On Thursday, Xi and Marcos issued a joint statement in which the two leaders said that they had an in-depth and candid exchange of views on the situation in the South China Sea, emphasized that maritime issues do not comprise the sum total of relations between the two countries and agreed to appropriately manage differences through peaceful means.

Consensus reached

Both sides reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace and stability in the region and the freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea. Xi and Marcos also reached a consensus on the peaceful resolution of disputes on the basis of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, the United Nations Charter and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Malindog-Uy said the Philippine pursuit of an independent foreign policy allows the country "to strike more leverage" with China as apprehensions relating to military encirclement by Washington is a top concern in the South China Sea. It also meant that the Philippines "will not allow itself to be used as a pawn by the United States, militarily speaking, to encircle China" in the region.

George Siy, chairman emeritus of the Manila-based Anvil Business Club, said the Philippines' relationship with China is "a major stabilizer". China is "an enabler" in Philippine infrastructure development, Siy said, noting how China has helped finance infrastructure projects in the island nation.

Driving force



Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (seated) presides over a groundbreaking ceremony on Monday for a China-backed project to upgrade the country's National Road 7. The works are needed for the road to better cope with increasing traffic. LI LAI / XINHUA



Nurses stage a strike in front of Mount Sinai Hospital in the Manhattan borough of New York on Monday. CRAIG RUTTLE / AP

Nurses go on strike in New York City

NEW YORK — Thousands of nurses went on strike on Monday at two major hospitals in New York City, after contract negotiations stalled over staffing and salaries nearly three years into the COVID-19 pandemic.

The privately owned, nonprofit hospitals were postponing nonemergency surgeries, diverting ambulances to other medical centers, pulling in temporary staffers, and assigning administrators with nursing backgrounds to work in wards in order to cope with the walkout.

As many as 3,500 nurses at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx and about 3,600 at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan were off the job. Talks were resuming on Monday afternoon at Montefiore, but there was no immediate word on when bargaining might resume at Mount Sinai.

Hundreds of nurses picketed, some singing the chorus from Twisted Sister's 1984 hit *We're Not Gonna Take It* outside Mount Sinai. It was one of many New York hospitals deluged with COVID-19 patients.

"We were heroes only two years ago," Warren Urquhart, a nurse in transplant and oncology units, said. "We were on the front lines of the city when everything came to a stop. And now, we need to come to a stop so they can understand how much we mean to this hospital and to the patients."

> "We love our job. We want to take care of our patients. But we just want to do it safely and in a humane way, where we feel appreciated."
>
> **Ashleigh Woodside,** a nurse

The nurses union, the New York State Nurses Association, said members had to strike because chronic understaffing leaves them caring for too many patients.

Jed Basubas said he generally attends to eight to 10 patients at a time, twice the ideal number in the units where he works. Nurse practitioner Juliet Escalon said she sometimes skips bathroom breaks to attend to patients. So does Ashleigh Woodside, who said her 12-hour operating room shifts often stretch to 14 hours because short staffing forces her and others to work overtime.

"We love our job. We want to take care of our patients. But we just want to do it safely and in a humane way, where we feel appreciated," Woodside said.

The hospitals said they had offered the same raises — totaling 19 percent over three years — that the union had accepted at several other facilities where contract talks reached tentative agreements in recent days.

Montefiore said it had agreed to add 170 more nurses. Mount Sinai's administration said the union's focus on nurse-to-patient ratios "ignores the progress we have made to attract and hire more new nurses, despite a global shortage of healthcare workers that is impacting hospitals across the country".

The hospitals said on Monday that they had prepared for the strike and were working to minimize the disruption. Mount Sinai called the union's behavior "reckless".

Some patients, meanwhile, were left in limbo.

"As a patient, of course, I am annoyed and inconvenienced," Darcy Gervasio wrote in an email. But Gervasio, a union member herself, said she blames the hospital management, not the nurses.

"I am very disappointed in the administration for letting the nursing staffing crisis get out of hand in the first place — especially in the wake of the tremendous strain on nurses during the COVID pandemic," Gervasio wrote.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Croatia welcomes Chinese tourists

ZAGREB, Croatia — Croatia warmly welcomes Chinese tourists, the director of the Croatian National Tourist Board, or CNTB, said on Monday.

"We warmly welcome Chinese tourists because they are our dear guests," director Kristjan Stanicic said. He noted that there used to be about 300,000 Chinese tourists visiting Croatia each year before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although Chinese tourists are reappearing on the streets of major Croatian cities such as Zagreb and Dubrovnik, their numbers are still marginal in terms of the huge potential the country has, Stanicic said.

He also said the number of incoming tourists is based on the number of flights to Europe, including to Croatia. There are no direct flights between Croatia and China so far. "We hope that normal flights between China and Europe will resume soon so that there will be a large number of Chinese arrivals to Europe, including Croatia," Stanicic said.

Main pillar

The CNTB's Shanghai office, launched four years ago, has worked hard to promote Croatian tourism, including organizing online workshops and digital fairs. Stanicic said in-person activities would be held this year to promote Croatian tourism, one of the main pillars of the country's economy.

The CNTB has always regarded China as its major focus in tourism development, Stanicic said. He voiced hope that the number of Chinese tourists visiting Croatia could return to pre-pandemic levels in a year or two.

"We will do everything to facilitate the arrival and stay of Chinese tourists in Croatia," he added.

Also on Monday, Indonesian Minister for Tourism and Creative Economy Sandiaga Uno said his country is ready to welcome Chinese tourists.

"We are ready to welcome Chinese tourists with a red carpet," Uno said at a weekly news briefing in the Indonesian capital Jakarta.

Uno said Chinese tourists had always topped the lists of the country's tourist destinations before the pandemic.

Statistics Indonesia recorded 2.07 million Chinese tourist arrivals in 2019. However, the number has drastically dropped since the pandemic.

XINHUA

US, Canada and Mexico differ at summit

By **MAYZHOU** in Houston
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While US President Joe Biden, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau were meeting on Tuesday for a series of talks on migration, trade and climate change at the North American Leaders Summit in Mexico City, it became obvious that the "three amigos summit" was not without tension.

First, a supposedly brief exchange of pleasantries between Biden and López Obrador on Monday turned into a contentious debate over the history of US support for Latin America.

López Obrador told Biden that the United States had done little to support development in Latin America since John F. Kennedy's "Alliance for Progress" spending in the early 1960s.

"This has been the only important thing, really, that has been done in terms of cooperation for development in our continent in more than half a century," said López Obrador.

He challenged Biden to improve life across the region, telling him that "you hold the key in your hand".

"This is the moment for us to determine to do away with this abandonment, this disdain and this forgetfulness for Latin America and the Caribbean," Lopez Obrador told Biden.

Biden didn't agree, replying that the US government has spent "tens of billions of dollars in the hemisphere" in the last 15 years, and that he had secured agreements from G7 countries to support infrastructure projects in the region.

However, Biden acknowledged that US response is not limited to the North American continent. "Unfortunately, our response just doesn't end in the Western Hemisphere: It's in central Europe. It's in Asia. It's in the Middle East. It's in Africa," he said. "I wish we could just have one focus."

Biden and López Obrador haven't been on good terms for the past two years. Lopez Obrador openly expressed his admiration for Biden's 2020 presidential opponent Donald Trump and last year he skipped a Los Angeles summit of the Americas because Biden didn't invite the leaders of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

Both the US and Canada have accused López Obrador of violating a free-trade pact by favoring Mexico's state-owned utility over those built by foreign and private companies.

Both Trudeau and López Obrador are concerned about Biden's efforts to boost US domestic manufacturing.

Biden's proposed spending plan stipulated that it would offer American consumers a $7,500 tax credit if they buy electric vehicles through 2026. After 2026, only purchases of electric vehicles made in the US would qualify for the credit. The base credit would go up by $4,500 for a vehicle made at a US plant that operates under a union-negotiated agreement.

Trudeau said last November that the credit would pose problems for vehicle production in Canada.

The White House released a statement outlining key targets of the summit, including trilateral cooperation in securing semiconductor and critical mineral supply chain, clean energy, a safe pathway for immigration, and curbing drug-trafficking and human-trafficking.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Middle East economy enjoys steady growth, report says

By **ZHAO RUINAN**
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The economy of Middle Eastern countries has achieved steady growth in 2021-22, which is backed by the global economic recovery and rising oil prices, experts said. However, they are still faced with daunting pressures in the coming year.

The experts made these comments in Beijing during the launch of the Annual Report on the Development of the Middle East No 24 (2021-2022) on Tuesday.

According to the report, the economic development in countries in the Middle East in 2021 was better than expected, and this good momentum continued until the beginning of 2022 due to strong domestic demand, global economic recovery and rising oil prices.

Governments in this region have also taken pandemic management measures to support small and medium-sized enterprises and vulnerable households, contributing to the better economic performance of most Middle East countries, it said.

Jiang Yingmei, a research fellow at the Institute of West Asian and African Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or the CASS, said the real GDP growth rate of the Middle East and North Africa was 5.8 percent, quoting data from an IMF report.

However, the researcher, who is also a co-author of the report, said the economic recovery of the Middle East in 2023 may face more uncertainties, with risks skewed toward the downside and diverging recoveries in different countries within the region.

Uncertainties such as the Russia-Ukraine crisis and interregional conflicts are still lingering, casting a pall over the region's economic recovery, the International Monetary Fund said.

Tang Zhichao, another co-author of the report, said the ripple effects of the conflict have spurred Middle Eastern countries to rethink their diplomatic strategies as they have been seeking diplomatic autonomy amid great power rivalries in recent years.

"The Ukraine crisis will absolutely reshape the regional situation ... but it will also add complexity for solving regional problems," Tang said.

Liu Dong, a CASS researcher focusing on the economy in the Middle East, said it is important for countries in the region to explore their own ways to cope with the development dilemma.

Wu Sike, China's former special envoy on Middle East affairs, said China-Middle East cooperation is of great significance amid upheaval in this region.

Liu Jianqiao contributed to this story.

How to end Christmas



A competitor throws a spruce tree during an event billed as the World Christmas Tree Throwing Championship in Weidenthal, Germany, on Sunday. UWE ANSPACH / DPA

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WORLD

Brazil's Lula slams 'acts of terrorism'

Leader's condemnation of violence comes as protests seek jail for rioters

BRASILIA — Brazilian security forces cleared protest camps on Monday and arrested 1,500 people as President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva condemned "acts of terrorism" after rioters stormed the seat of power, unleashing chaos on the capital.

Hundreds of soldiers and police officers mobilized to dismantle an improvised camp outside the army's headquarters in Brasilia.

There, nearly 3,000 supporters of ex-president Jair Bolsonaro had set up tents — used as a base for the sea of protesters who ran riot inside the presidential palace, the Congress and the Supreme Court for around four hours on Sunday.

Lula da Silva, famously known as Lula, who took office on Jan 1 after a bitterly divisive election win over Bolsonaro, returned to work in the pillaged presidential palace, where reporters saw the wreckage that remained of the previous day's havoc: Trashed artwork and offices, shattered windows and doors, broken glass strewed across the floor, and furniture dragged into a reflecting pool.

Lula, the 77-year-old who previously led Brazil from 2003 to 2010, met with the leaders of both houses of Congress and the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and joined them in condemning what many called the South American country's version of the Capitol riots in the United States two years ago.

"The three powers of the republic, the defenders of democracy and the constitution, reject the terrorist acts and criminal, coup-mongering vandalism that occurred," they said in a joint statement.

Lula accepted an invitation to meet with US President Joe Biden next month in Washington, US officials said.

Bolsonaro, who narrowly lost the October elections, said on Twitter that he had been hospitalized in Florida with abdominal pains stemming from a near-fatal knife attack when he was campaigning for the presidency in 2018.

Bolsonaro has alleged he is the victim of a conspiracy against him by Brazil's electoral authorities.

The ex-president, dubbed the "Tropical Trump", traveled to Orlando on the second-last day of his term — snubbing Lula's inauguration, in a break with tradition.

Bolsonaro, 67, condemned the "pillaging" in Brasilia on Sunday night, but rejected Lula's claim he incited the attacks, and defended the right to "peaceful protests".

As the nation continued to come to grips with Sunday's stunning violence, hundreds of people gathered along a major avenue in downtown Sao Paulo to defend Brazilian democracy and demand punishment for the people who stormed the halls of power a day earlier.

"I have not endured what I have in this life to see what I saw yesterday — my people, my country, divided in such a way," said Edi Valladares, a 61-year-old teacher.

Earlier in the day, large contingents of riot police officers deployed to lock down the capital's Three Powers Square, home to three government buildings.

More denouncement

Condemnation continued to pour in from around the world.

In a joint statement ahead of summit talks in Mexico City, Biden, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau condemned the attacks and said they "stand with Brazil as it safeguards its democratic institutions".

Many drew the inevitable comparison to Jan 6, 2021, when supporters of then-US president Donald Trump invaded the Capitol in Washington in a violent, failed bid to stop Congress from certifying his election loss.

Lula, who was in the southeastern city of Araraquara visiting a flood-hit region when the riot started, signed a decree on Sunday declaring a federal intervention in Brasilia, giving his government special powers over the local police force to restore law and order in the capital.

Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes suspended Brasilia Governor Ibaneis Rocha, a Bolsonaro ally, from his post for 90 days, on grounds of "criminal negligence".

AGENCIES—XINHUA



Floods take toll

A house stands partially under water in Gilroy, California, on Monday. Storms have slammed the state, swamping roads, turning rivers into gushing flood zones and forcing the evacuation of thousands. JOSH EDELSON / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Biden faces scrutiny over classified documents

By **BELINDA ROBINSON** in New York
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US President Joe Biden is drawing criticism from Republicans after 10 classified documents were found last November in his former office at the Penn Biden Center think tank in Washington, prompting an investigation by the Department of Justice (DOJ).

The DOJ said Tuesday it was reviewing the sensitive documents found by Biden's lawyers last year after the White House said that they did not know what was in them. Information on the discovery last year only came to light Monday in a report by CBS News.

The White House Counsel's Office on Tuesday did not answer questions on why it took two months to disclose that the documents had been found.

Biden also avoided reporters' questions while he met with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the North American Leaders' Summit.

Ian Sams, spokesman for the White House Counsel's Office, said in a statement: "This is an ongoing process under review [by the Department of Justice], so we are going to be limited in what we can say at this time. But we are committed to doing this the right way, and we will provide further details when and as appropriate."

Richard Sauber, special counsel to the president, said in a statement: "A small number of documents with classified markings" were found by Biden's lawyers in a "locked closet" on Nov 2, while they were clearing out his office at Penn Biden Center.

Sauber said that following the discovery of the documents, Biden's attorneys immediately alerted the White House Counsel's Office, which contacted the National Archives and Records Administration. The archives administration picked up the documents the next day.

Sauber added: "Since that discovery, the president's personal attorneys have cooperated with the Archives and Department of Justice in a process to ensure that any Obama-Biden Administration records are appropriately in the possession of the Archives."

The Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement in Washington, which has headquarters at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, was founded following Biden's two terms as vice-president in the administration of former president Barack Obama.

The center officially opened in February 2018, but had a "soft" opening in March 2017, according to The Daily Pennsylvanian, an independent student newspaper at the university.

Biden would occasionally use an office at the center in Washington from 2017 until 2019, when he launched his 2020 presidential campaign.

News of the discovery of the documents prompted a response by former president Donald Trump and his Republican allies, after Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida was raided by the FBI last year in a search for classified documents taken during his four years in office.

Trump wrote on his social media platform Truth Social: "When is the FBI going to raid the many homes of Joe Biden, perhaps even the White House? These documents were definitely not declassified."

Dozens of documents marked classified were found at Trump's palatial Florida estate in August. The FBI carried out a raid after attempts to recover them were rebuffed.

In May 2021, the National Archives contacted Trump's team about the documents that were in his possession, saying they needed to be returned because they are government property.

By January 2022, Trump's team gave some of the documents to the National Archives but the archives discovered that the returned material included classified and other material. It asked the Justice Department to launch a probe into alleged mishandling of classified documents.

In August, the FBI retrieved dozens more documents in rooms at Mar-a-Lago. Altogether, Trump had 300 documents in 33 boxes, the FBI said.

In a September interview with CBS' *60 Minutes*, Biden called Trump's possession of the documents "irresponsible".

That Biden also may have mishandled classified documents comes as the Justice Department decides whether or not to bring charges against Trump, who announced he will run for president in 2024.

Representative James Comer of Kentucky, the new GOP chairman of the House Oversight Committee, asked reporters: "Is the White House going to be raided tonight? Are they going to raid the Bidens?

"This is further concern that there's a two-tier justice system within the DOJ with how they treat Republicans versus Democrats, certainly how they treat the former president versus the current president."

Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, a Democratic chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called for a briefing.

Representative Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican, told reporters Monday: "They knew about this a week before the election, maybe the American people should have known that. They certainly knew about the raid on Mar-a-Lago 91 days before this election, but nice if on November 2, the country would have known that there were classified documents at the Biden Center."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

LA County declares homeless emergency

By **LIU YINMENG** in Los Angeles
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The five-member Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday to declare a countywide state of emergency over homelessness.

The proclamation will streamline assistance for tens of thousands of people living outdoors, including the deployment of resources and the hiring of people to respond to the issue, such as mental health workers. It also aims to enhance coordinated efforts between local governments.

"We know what to do. We have solutions that work. But simply put, they are not being implemented quickly enough or at a scale large enough to solve this crisis," said Third District Supervisor Lindsey P. Horvath, who co-authored the motion with Fifth District Supervisor Kathryn Barger.

In recent years, the county has gotten 100,000 people off the streets. However, homelessness continues to grow alarmingly, Horvath said.

Shelter officials across 15 states reported a sudden surge in the number of people looking for help, many of whom were single mothers seeking services, The Washington Post reported in July. Some waiting lists have doubled or tripled in months.

Soaring housing costs and persistent inflation on necessities such as gas and food were identified as the main contributors to the recent ballooning in homelessness. There also has been an increase in families with steady jobs that struggled to find affordable housing, the Post said.

According to Harvard University's State of the Nation's Housing report, cost burdens for houses have climbed due to factors such as a 20.6 percent rise in home prices between 2021 and 2022 and a 12 percent jump in rent.

More than 580,000 Americans experienced homelessness in 2020, data from the National Alliance to End Homelessness shows. With more than 160,000 unhoused individuals, California tops the list of states in homelessness.

As of early 2022, the number of homeless individuals in Los Angeles County totaled 69,144, a 55 percent increase from 44,359 in 2015. Among those struggling to find a home, 70 percent were unsheltered, according to the LA County proclamation.

"The residents of Los Angeles County see this crisis play out daily and desire an effective and compassionate solution," it said.

People in the county became homeless due to multiple factors. At the forefront were rent burdens and low paychecks, the proclamation noted. Other reasons such as mental illness, substance abuse, no-fault evictions, job loss, medical incidents and significant unseen costs also contributed to the issue.

The supervisors' decision came a month after LA's newly elected mayor Karen Bass declared homelessness a state of emergency on Dec 12, her first day in office.

"My mandate is to move Los Angeles in a new direction, with an urgent and strategic approach to solving our city's toughest challenges and creating a brighter future for every Angeleno," said Bass.

Just hours after he was sworn in on Dec 21, Long Beach's new mayor, Rex Richardson, also directed his staff to put together an emergency declaration to tackle homelessness.

Missile impact



Rescuers work at the scene of a missile strike on a market in the village of Shevchenkove in the Kharkiv region on Monday. As Russia's special military operation in Ukraine grinds on toward the one-year mark, both sides have lost tens of thousands of lives.
SERGEY BOBOK / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Ray of hope offered in Northern Ireland negotiations

By **JULIAN SHEA** in London
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Talks between the European Union and the United Kingdom to resolve the enduring problem of the trade status of Northern Ireland post-Brexit look to have made a breakthrough, after the two sides confirmed that they had reached an agreement on sharing trade data, which could offer a "new basis" for further discussions over the legislation known as the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Northern Ireland is politically part of the UK but geographically isolated, and shares the UK's only land border with an EU member state, the Republic of Ireland.

In a bid to avoid the reintroduction of a hard border between the two, which would revive memories and tensions associated with the decades of violent conflict known as the Troubles, since the Brexit agreement was reached in late 2020, Northern Ireland has been treated differently to the rest of the UK, remaining subject to many EU regulations.

This is politically unacceptable to many Brexit supporters, particularly in Northern Ireland, where communities and politics are largely divided between the unionists, whose political and cultural allegiance is to the UK, and the nationalists, who see themselves as Irish, the division which lay at the heart of the Troubles.

Northern Ireland's government has not functioned properly for almost two years after the Democratic Unionist Party withdrew from the power sharing executive in protest at the stipulations of the Protocol.

But following a meeting between the EU's chief negotiator Maros Sefcovic, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly and Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris, a joint statement was issued offering hope of progress, with the EU being granted access to British data about goods going from the mainland to Northern Ireland, a move regarded as essential for securing a wider-ranging deal.

A joint statement said that the two sides recognized this development was "a critical prerequisite to building trust and providing assurance, and provided a new basis for EU-UK discussions", adding that they would "work rapidly to scope the potential for solutions in different areas on the basis of this renewed understanding", with a further meeting to take place next week.

The Guardian newspaper reported that Ireland's Foreign Minister Micheal Martin will meet Sefcovic next week to discuss the progress, in what it called "a sign of the intensification of talks".

The BBC's Brussels correspondent Jessica Parker observed that the statement was a sign of a more conciliatory tone of discussion from the government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak than that of his predecessors.

"The fact that Brussels and London are now prepared to say, in public, here's something important and specific we agree on shouldn't be underplayed," she wrote. "In this context, it's been rare."

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BUSINESS

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Supervision set to guide platforms

Experts: New steps will boost tech, corporate governance, sustainability

By FAN FEIFEI
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China's supervision of platform companies' financial activities will normalize with more targeted efforts to guide them toward better compliance, promote the healthy development of the sector and better serve the real economy, experts said.

Their assessment emerged after Guo Shuqing, Party secretary of the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, said the special rectification work on 14 platform companies' financial businesses has "basically completed", and there are only a few residual issues to sort out.

Supervision will be regular henceforth and support will be extended to help platforms play a bigger role in bolstering economic growth, job creation and global competition, Guo said in an interview with Xinhua News Agency on Saturday.

Chinese tech heavyweight Alibaba's financial arm Ant Group said on the same day that no shareholder, alone or jointly with other parties, will have control over the company, as part of its broader push to further optimize corporate governance.

The move means Alibaba's founder Jack Ma will no longer control the Chinese financial technology company after a series of adjustments changed on how voting rights would be exercised by Ant's major shareholders.

Ant said it will continue to serve the real economy by leveraging digital technology, implementing sustainable development strategy, optimizing corporate governance, investing in cutting-edge technologies, and creating greater value for society.

The Hangzhou municipal government signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Alibaba on Tuesday. The two parties will strengthen collaboration to bolster the development of the digital economy and "intelligent" industries, as well as achieve common prosperity.

Shen Yan, deputy head of the Institute of Digital Finance at Peking University, said the normalized supervision will replace intensive and special rectifications of improper behaviors in platform companies, and the regulatory environment will become more stable.

The recent policy developments are conducive to "stabilizing market expectations and enabling the financial sector to further serve the real economy, thus promoting the high-quality development of the digital economy", Shen said.

Pan Helin, co-director of the Digital Economy and Financial Innovation Research Center at Zhejiang University's International Business School, said, "The latest moves have sent a strong signal that China will encourage the standardized and healthy development of platform enterprises."

The two-year rectification work of platform economy is nearing an end, while more concrete measures will be taken to achieve regular supervision, he said.

On the changes to Ant's shareholder voting rights, Pan said optimization of the corporate governance structure will ensure stable operations at platform enterprises, and benefit their long-term, sustainable development. Ant, he said, may well seek an IPO in the future.

Since late 2020, Chinese regulators have been ramping up supervision of platform enterprises' financial businesses. In December 2020, financial authorities, including the central bank and the banking and securities watchdogs, asked Ant to rectify its business and comply with regulatory requirements.

In April 2021, authorities concerned summoned 13 internet-based platforms engaged in finance, including Tencent, JD Finance, ByteDance and 360 DigiTech, and ordered them to strengthen compliance with regulations.

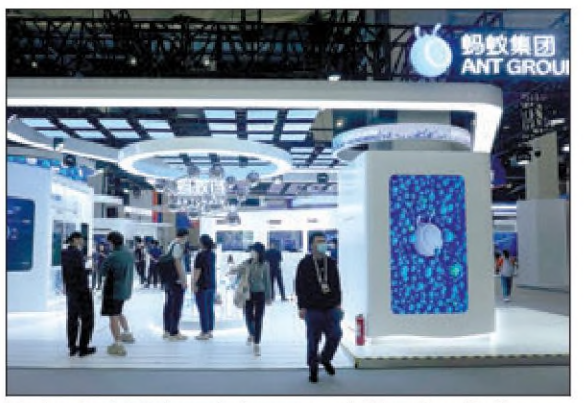
Ant undertook business rectification and set up a consumer finance company in Chongqing in June 2021. Chinese regulators have recently approved Ant's plan to raise 10.5 billion yuan ($1.5 billion) for its consumer finance unit, marking a key step forward for the revamp of Ant's lucrative consumer loan business.

In November, 360 DigiTech, a Chinese mainland internet-based finance firm, completed a secondary listing on the Hong Kong bourse. The company said the consumption sector will witness a strong rebound, and the company will offer favorable credit services to consumers and enterprises in the industrial chain to bolster the recovery of consumption and serve the real economy.

Ouyang Rihui, assistant dean of the China Center for Internet Economy Research at the Central University of Finance and Economics, said platform enterprises should collect and utilize data resources in accordance with the laws and regulations, and attach great importance to protecting data security. He also highlighted the need to make full use of data elements to facilitate the development of the digital economy.

China has rolled out 20 key measures to help build basic systems for data and put data resources to better use. The larger goal is to activate the value of data elements, and inject fresh impetus into economic growth, experts said.

Ouyang Shijia contributed to this story.



The booth of Ant Group during an expo in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. LONG WEI / FOR CHINA DAILY



An employee arranges gold ornaments at a jewelry shop in Renhuai, Guizhou province. CHEN YONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Gold glitters as central banks stock up

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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Central banks' gold reserves around the world have broadly risen over the past 12 months to combat various market headwinds such as inflation or volatility, with the trend set to continue this year, industry experts said.

The People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, added 970,000 ounces of gold holdings in December, according to the bank's latest data on Saturday. Its total gold reserves stand at 64.64 million ounces after the latest purchases.

It is the second consecutive month for the PBOC to increase its holdings of the yellow metal, following a 103,000-ounce purchase in November.

It should be noted that China's gold reserves had remained unchanged for three years since September 2019.

Thanks to the PBOC's higher demand for the precious metal, A-share firms with business related to gold mining or retailing performed strongly. They reported an average share price increase of 0.21 percent on Tuesday, while the benchmark Shanghai Composite Index shed 0.21 percent.

Similar practices have been seen elsewhere. According to the World Gold Council, net gold purchases made by central banks worldwide spiked 47 percent year-on-year to 50 metric tons in November. Turkiye, Uzbekistan and India made the largest increases in gold holdings in November, which was in line with the overall trend throughout 2022.

Central banks around the world shored up gold reserves in 2022 at a pace not seen since 1967, when the US dollar was still backed by the precious metal, according to the WGC. The pace has been further accelerated since November. To date, central banks' total gold reserves have reached 36,745 tons, the highest level since November 1974, added the WGC.

Gold's stable and uncorrelated performance amid global market turbulence, including soaring inflation and more volatile equity markets, partly contributed to the "exceptional" net buying from central banks last year, said WGC experts.

While the greenback jumped 8 percent and the yield of US Treasury Inflation-Protected securities rose an unprecedented 250 basis points last year, gold still managed to eke out a 0.4 percent gain on a yearly basis. This, according to WGC experts, was extraordinary, for when TIPs yields reported the previous largest annual increase of 150 bps in 2013 — a time when the US dollar remained flat — gold prices plunged almost 30 percent.

Past experience showed that gold price rallies came after central banks increased their gold reserves, said the WGC. When central bank bulk gold purchases were reported in 2011 and 2018, gold prices rose 28 percent and 1 percent, respectively.

Analysts from CITIC Securities believe the yellow metal is likely to maintain its upward momentum and may break the previous record of $2,075.14 per ounce seen in August 2020.

Ronan Manly, a precious metals analyst with Singaporean dealer BullionStar, said that central banks' sizable appetite for gold can be interpreted as part of de-dollarization strategies. The accumulated gold reserves in Europe and emerging economies can be read as their ways to avoid or bypass international transactions dominated by the greenback.

Anticipating a lackluster stock market in the US this year, Swissquote Bank analyst Ipek Ozkardeskaya said overall appetite for gold will further increase to hedge against fresh market turbulence.

With the upcoming Chinese Lunar New Year, which starts on Jan 22 this year, gold consumption at the retail end will pick up in China based on past experience, said experts from Minsheng Securities. The recovery in consumer confidence will also boost discretionary buying, including gold.

Aid for small biz seen spurring recovery

By ZHANG YUE
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China's recent moves to ease financial burdens faced by micro and small businesses and households are expected to further spur both economic rebound and consumption recovery this year, officials and experts said.

In the past week, officials have reiterated various policy measures that were effected to help small businesses.

On Monday, the Ministry of Finance announced on its website that China's small businesses with monthly sales of no more than 100,000 yuan ($14,764) each are exempted from value-added tax this year. This is expected to ease the burden on firms amid renewed efforts to bolster growth.

For certain small businesses, two VAT rates, currently levied at 3 percent, will be lowered to 1 percent.

Last year till Nov 10, China had cut or deferred taxes and administrative fees by more than 3.7 trillion yuan, according to data released by the State Taxation Administration.

Facilitating the recovery of smaller businesses has been an integral part of China's policy mix to boost overall economic recovery this year. On Saturday, Guo Shuqing, Party secretary of the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, said in an interview with China Central Television that the country will widen financing channels for private firms, supporting their stock and bond issuances.

Prudent monetary policy will be precise and forceful, with a focus on expanding effective demand and deepening the supply-side structural reforms, Guo said.

Financial policies will work in sync with fiscal and social policies to increase incomes of low- and middle-income groups as well as those hit hard by COVID-19, said Guo, who is also the chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission.

Some experts said they believe these moves are crucial for this year's growth and will provide prompt support to businesses now staging a recovery, while also boosting household consumption.

Qu Hongbin, chief economist for China at HSBC, said in a recent interview that this year, greater financial support shall be channeled to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises that have been hit the hardest by the COVID-19 aftermath.

"With more and better targeted fiscal and financial support leaning specifically toward them, this is expected to facilitate a faster and stronger recovery of the Chinese economy," he said.

He also said that most of the country's fiscal resources were channeled toward large-scale infrastructure projects in the past. Yet, relatively limited resources currently available shall be directed toward smaller businesses and low-income groups on a priority basis.

JCET hits significant high-tech microchip milestone

By MA SI
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JCET Group, a leading Chinese provider of integrated circuit back end manufacturing and technology services, said it has achieved high-volume manufacturing of integrated packaging for 4-nanometer chips.

This marks a breakthrough in the country's chip packaging industry, and represents the progress local companies have made with hard work, experts said.

Packaging is an essential part of semiconductor manufacturing and design. It affects power, performance and costs on a macro level, as well as core functionality.

JCET said it has leveraged chiplet technologies to achieve production of packaging for 4 nm chips for foreign customers, with a maximum packaging area of some 1,500 square meters.

Chiplet is essentially a technology that allows an integrated circuit block to be interconnected with other ICs to form a larger, more complex chip.

With the rapid development of high-performance computing, artificial intelligence, 5G, smart automobiles, cloud and other applications in recent years, continuous innovation of back-end manufacturing technologies is required to compensate for the slowdown of Moore's Law, JCET said on its official website.

Moore's Law is a key rule that has affected the integrated circuit sector for a long time. It states that roughly every two years, the number of transistors on a microchip will double.

In response to market demand, JCET is working hard to explore new, advanced chip packaging technologies, the company said.

Wu Jiangxing, an academician at the Chinese Academy of Engineering, said chip manufacturing is evolving to embrace more difficult designs and complicated processing. This in turn is causing costs to continue to rise.

Against such a backdrop, chiplets are rising in importance as they can improve productivity and yields, lower design complexity and help cut costs of both design and manufacturing, experts said.

A Zheshang Securities report expressed a similar view, noting that as an important alternative to conventional chips, chiplets may bring new opportunities to the domestic semiconductor industrial chain.

Founded in 1972, JCET's comprehensive portfolio covers a wide spectrum of semiconductor applications such as smartphones, communications, computing and automobile, through advanced wafer-level packaging.

JCET has two research and development centers in China and South Korea, six manufacturing locations in China, South Korea and Singapore, and sales centers around the world.

Briefly

Auto sales back on track in December

Retail sales of passenger cars reached 2.169 million units in December, a year-on-year increase of 3 percent — a huge improvement from the 9.1 percent year-on-year fall in November, said the China Passenger Car Association on Tuesday. Sales in December rose 31.4 percent from the previous month, marking the strongest month-on-month performance since 2008. Last year, cumulative retail auto sales stood at 20.543 million units, an increase of 1.9 percent year-on-year, and a net increase of 386,000 units year-on-year. Since the launch of preferential policies to reduce car purchase taxes, passenger car sales saw a 1.452 million unit year-on-year increase from June to December, suggesting a strong contribution of the policy to the passenger car market, the association said.

Homegrown passenger jets off to flying start

The large passenger aircraft industry is gaining traction in Shanghai as the narrow-body C919 aircraft has netted 1,035 orders, and the wide-body CR929 model has completed the first-round requirement validation, an official report said on Tuesday. As of the end of 2022, the homegrown regional passenger jet ARJ21 aircraft has received 690 orders from 25 customers, and 100 ARJ21 aircraft have been delivered to nine Chinese and overseas companies, the official website of China Securities Journal reported.

China key buyer of Cambodian produce

China was one of the key importers of Cambodian agricultural produce in 2022, according to a report released by the Cambodian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The report said China purchased a number of Cambodian agricultural products, particularly milled rice, bananas, mangoes, cassava, cashews, corn, longans and pepper, among others. It added that 689,702 tons of Cambodian agricultural products were shipped to China during the January-November period in 2022.

PBOC conducts reverse repos

China's central bank conducted 2 billion yuan ($295.81 million) of reverse repos on Tuesday to maintain liquidity in the banking system. The interest rate for the seven-day reverse repos was set at 2 percent, according to the People's Bank of China.

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BUSINESS



Potential homebuyers inquire about housing projects at an agency in Dongguan, Guangdong province, in June. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Dongguan moves to boost home purchases

By **QIU QUANLIN**
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Housing transactions have increased in Dongguan, Guangdong province, recently after local authorities loosened the grip over home purchases half a month ago.

A total of 158 vacant second-hand homes were sold in Dongguan just on Monday.

On Dec 26, when the city announced the removal of several home-purchase restrictions, 70 such houses were sold.

"The housing market is recovering, and more potential buyers are making inquiries about home prices," said Wu Yunping, a manager with Beike, a real estate agency.

Wu said the moves are leading to the sales peak of homes, and "we believe that there will be a sales peak of homes after the Spring Festival".

Apart from vacant second-hand homes, 92 new houses were also sold in the city on Monday, according to the local authority.

> "The housing market is recovering, and more potential buyers are making inquiries about home prices."
>
> **Wu Yunping,** manager with Beike

Easing the home purchase restrictions was part of the local government's efforts to further tap the housing demand and secure the development of the real estate market, according to local housing authorities.

"Compared to many of its peers in Guangdong, Dongguan, as a major city for manufacturing in China, still has a long way to go in terms of its real estate development," said Li Yujia, chief researcher with the Center for Housing Policy Studies, Guangdong Urban and Rural Planning and Design Institute.

There are over 10 million permanent residents in Dongguan, but more than half of them are not local residents, and they mainly live in urban areas, which partly leads to relatively lower housing ownership in the city, Li said.

"Dongguan's housing market is in urgent need of improvements. More supportive moves such as offering subsidies should be in place to stimulate local demand for homes," Li added.

According to China Real Estate Information Corp, a property research institution, the sales area of new houses in Dongguan was 2.43 million square meters in the first 11 months of 2022, down 44 percent year-on-year.

Dongguan's real estate market policy has undergone several rounds of adjustments since last year, reflecting positive signals of boosting housing consumption. For example, families with two children or more in the city were allowed to buy an additional house, according to a notice the Dongguan government issued in May.

Home sales across the country may also recover as authorities have introduced a series of incentives to shore up the sector, including allowing relaxed mortgage rate minimums for first-time homebuyers in some cities, analysts said.

According to a joint statement issued early this month by the People's Bank of China, the central bank, and the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, cities with new home prices falling for three months in a row on both a monthly and yearly basis are allowed to temporarily maintain, lower or remove the local limits on mortgage rates for first-time homebuyers.

"Reducing mortgage rates will help stabilize home sales and improve real estate development," said Cheng Qiang, chief macroeconomic analyst at CITIC Securities.

Sizzling short video biz 'hope' for Tencent

Tech giant posts big surge in WeChat Channels creators, viewers in 2022

By **CHENG YU**
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WeChat Channels, Tencent Holdings' short video platform, saw robust growth in video views and monetization last year, as the country's leading social networking and gaming company strives to find new growth engines that rival Douyin of Bytedance in the increasingly fierce short video sector.

The platform, which mainly enables users to record, create and share videos, saw the number of daily active creators and video uploads rise by over 100 percent year-on-year last year. The number of creators with over 10,000 followers and views of original videos skyrocketed by 308 percent and 350 percent year-on-year, respectively.

In terms of livestreaming, the number of users and time spent watching livestreams soared 300 percent and 156 percent, respectively, over the past year. It also propelled the total gross merchandise value to increase by more than 800 percent from 2021 with the average transaction value surpassing 200 yuan ($29.5).

The tech company said earlier that the total time users spend on Channels exceeds 80 percent of that of WeChat Moments, a popular social networking function allowing interaction with text, photos and videos between WeChat friends.

The move came as Tencent's founder and CEO Pony Ma said in an internal meeting in December that Channels has become "the hope of the whole company" and Tencent should continue to focus on its core businesses while making short videos its new priority.

The rapid development of short videos has made a considerable impact on the internet globally and is forcing the company to adjust its investment strategy, Ma said.

> China's short video industry has shifted from an incremental market to a stock market where user time is gradually peaked, thus the competition is becoming fierce."
>
> **Huang Chuxin,** professor at the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

A report by the China Internet Network Information Center showed that the total number of users of short videos saw a significant increase of 28.05 million to 962 million in the first half of last year. Data from market consultancy QuestMobile showed that the average monthly time spent viewing short videos increased to 53.2 hours in December last year, surpassing that of instant messaging.

"China's short video industry has shifted from an incremental market to a stock market where user time is gradually peaked, thus the competition is becoming fierce," said Huang Chuxin, a professor of communications at the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in a note.

"It is important for short video platforms to create sound content to stand out. To realize the improvement of liquidity is another important direction for the development of short video platforms," Huang said.

Growth a big reality for AR, VR domestic market



A visitor (right) checks out Nreal products during an expo in Hefei, Anhui province, in November. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

By **MA SI**
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China's market for augmented reality and virtual reality will expand quicker than any other major country over the next few years, on the back of mounting enthusiasm from both enterprises and consumers to embrace the applications, experts said.

The Chinese AR and VR market's average annual compound growth rate should be 43.8 percent from 2022 to 2026, compared with a 38.5 percent clip globally, market research company International Data Corp forecasted in a report.

Spending on AR and VR in China is predicted to hit $13.1 billion by 2026, making it the world's second-largest market, the report showed. Global spending may jump to $74.7 billion in 2026 over the same period.

VR accounts for 70 percent of investment in the two technologies in China, according to IDC. Gaming is the leading user scenario for VR, accounting for almost a third of its use, followed by training and collaboration. These three subcategories should constitute more than half of China's VR market from 2022 to 2026.

The reality-enriching sector is growing with an increasing number of consumer products available. Consumer-focused goods are predicted to make up nearly 40 percent of the entire AR and VR market by 2026. The education, healthcare and professional services sectors are expected to adopt immersive technologies, constituting more than 28 percent of their use, IDC added.

Xu Chi, founder and CEO of Nreal, a Chinese AR glasses pioneer, expects that by 2030 there may be more than 1 billion AR or VR glasses offering various virtual and real interactive experiences.

"People today may think this figure is very high but sometimes we overestimate the technology iteration in two to three years and underestimate the changes brought by technology or products in more than 10 years," Xu said.

Nreal said as of December 2022, the Beijing-based company has produced more than 100,000 AR glasses, making it the world's first consumer-oriented AR hardware company to cross the mark.

With sales in China, Japan and the United States, the shipment of Nreal's AR glasses exceeded 70,000 units in the fourth quarter of 2022.

According to Xu, the company's technological advantages lie in the fields of 3D perception algorithms and optical technology. It has set up an optical manufacturing base in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, to develop display modules. More than 60 percent of its staff members are involved in research and development, and nearly a quarter have overseas work experience.

David MacQueen, executive director of Strategy Analytics, said Nreal is driving the consumer AR market and has found a sweet spot for both price — $599 — and functionality.

Meanwhile, the company has been stepping up efforts to beef up AR content. It has partnered with video streaming platforms iQiyi, Migu — the digital content unit of China Mobile, electric carmaker Nio and short-video platform Kuaishou to develop customized AR content.

Nio, for instance, has cooperated with Nreal to develop customized glasses that can project an effective 201-inch screen at six meters, as the carmaker aims to provide passengers with an immersive visual experience in its latest SUV models.

AR technology imposes digital images over the real world, while VR is used to create a purely immersive digital experience.

AR and VR form a key component of the metaverse — a trending concept that loosely refers to a world of endless, interconnected virtual communities where people can meet, work and play, using such technologies as VR headsets and AR glasses.

Other Chinese AR and VR companies such as Pico are also stepping up to expand their market presence. Pico, owned by tech company ByteDance, is working to popularize VR with its Pico 4 series.

Chinese firms' role in global economy bigger

By **ZHENG YIRAN**
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Chinese enterprises, both State-owned and private, are striving to play a bigger role in promoting global economic development and will further accelerate their steps going global, said industry experts during a summit held in Beijing on Tuesday.

Centrally administered SOEs have been ramping up efforts to support local economic development while expanding their footprints overseas, Peng Huagang, secretary-general of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, said during the Chinese Enterprise Global Image Summit.

They have built over 8,000 projects in 180 countries and regions, playing their respective roles in supporting the local industrial upgrade and economic development, Peng said.

Chinese private companies have also made "great contributions" in promoting global economic development and driving up global trade, experts said at the summit.

"There have been vigorous achievements in China's private sector in the past 45 years since the nation's opening-up and reform," said Wang Hongyan, a member of All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, during the summit.

"There were over 47 million private companies by the end of August — up twofold compared to the number in 2012 — becoming an increasingly significant force in driving up the global economy," Wang said.

According to the 2022 Chinese Enterprise Global Image Survey Report, nearly 70 percent of surveyed foreign persons acknowledged China's contribution to the global and regional economies.

The report was jointly issued by the China Center for International Communication Development, the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies and market consultancy Kantar Worldpanel.

The report also showed that more than 70 percent of those surveyed held a positive overall impression of Chinese enterprises.

Surveyed people from the BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — and countries and regions involved in the Belt and Road Initiative spoke highly of Chinese enterprises operating overseas and acknowledged their technologies and investments.

In addition, many among the surveyed expressed willingness to cooperate with Chinese enterprises in technology, energy recourses and infrastructure, said the report.

Zhang Jianchun, deputy head of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, said: "To strengthen their global images, Chinese enterprises should better shoulder their responsibilities to promote the common development of the globe.

"In addition, they should continue to promote low-carbon and sustainable development, promote the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, promote mutual benefit in our own development and constantly expand the convergence of common interests."

Held by the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, the Chinese Enterprise Global Image Summit has been held for 10 years. The theme of this year's summit is "Promote global development together".

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BUSINESSFOCUS

RCEP a catalyst for regional integration

With lower tariffs, growing markets, member countries see long-lasting mutual benefits



A train loaded with export-bound goods leaves Xi'an, Shaanxi province, for Hanoi, Vietnam, in August. LI YIBO / XINHUA

HONG KONG — Commenting on his doubled income from the sale of five metric tons of durian to export traders in December, Nguyen Van Hai, a veteran farmer in Vietnam's southern Tien Giang province, attributed such growth to the adoption of stricter cultivation standards.

He also expressed satisfaction over higher import demand from countries participating in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

Like Hai, many Vietnamese farmers and companies are expanding their orchards and improving the quality of their fruit in order to boost their exports to China and other RCEP members.

The RCEP agreement, which entered into force a year ago, groups 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. It aims to ultimately eliminate tariffs on over 90 percent of goods trading among its signatories over the next 20 years.

As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple uncertainties, the implementation of the RCEP trade pact offers a timely boost to faster recovery and the long-term growth and prosperity of the region.

Timely boost to recovery

To increase exports to RCEP member countries, Vietnamese enterprises must innovate technology and improve design and product quality, Dinh Gia Nghia, deputy head of a food export company in the northern Ninh Binh province, told Xinhua News Agency.

"The RCEP has become a launching pad for us to increase product output and quality, as well as the quantity and the value of exports," he said.

Nghia estimates that in 2023, Vietnam's fruit and vegetable exports to China may increase by 20 to 30 percent, thanks mainly to smoother transport, quicker Customs clearance and more efficient and transparent regulations and procedures under the RCEP agreement, as well as e-commerce development.

Customs clearance has been shortened to six hours for agricultural products and within 48 hours for general goods under the RCEP agreement, a major boon for Thailand's export-dependent economy.

In the first nine months of 2022, Thailand's trade with RCEP member countries, which accounted for around 60 percent of its total foreign trade, rose 10.1 percent year-on-year to $252.73 billion, data from Thailand's Ministry of Commerce showed.

For Japan, the RCEP has brought the country and its largest trading partner China into the same free trade framework for the first time.

"Introducing zero tariffs when there is a large volume of trade will have the most significant effect on trade promotion," said Masahiro Morinaga, chief delegate of the Japan External Trade Organization's office in Chengdu, Sichuan province.



A worker processes textile products to be exported to Japan at a factory in Huai'an, Jiangsu province, in February 2021. CHEN LIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Japan's official data showed that the country's exports of agricultural, forestry and fishery products and food hit 1.12 trillion yen ($8.47 billion) for the 10 months through October last year. Among them, exports to the Chinese mainland accounted for 20.47 percent and increased by 24.5 percent from the same time a year earlier, ranking first in export volume.

In the first 11 months of 2022, China's imports and exports with RCEP members totaled 11.8 trillion yuan ($1.74 trillion), up 7.9 percent year-on-year.

"The RCEP has been a significant stand-out agreement in a time of great global trade uncertainty," said professor Peter Drysdale from the East Asian Bureau of Economic Research at Australian National University. "It pushes back against trade protectionism and fragmentation in 30 percent of the world economy and is a huge stabilizing factor in the global trading system."

According to an Asian Development Bank study, the RCEP will increase the member economies' incomes by 0.6 percent by 2030, adding $245 billion annually to regional income and 2.8 million jobs to regional employment.

Robust ecosystem

Experts say the RCEP pact will accelerate regional economic integration through lower tariffs, stronger supply chains and production networks, and forge a more robust trade ecosystem in the region.

The RCEP's common rules of origin, which stipulate that product components from any member country are treated equally, will increase sourcing options within the region, create more opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to integrate into the regional supply chains and reduce trading costs for businesses.

For emerging economies among the 15 signatories, foreign direct investment inflows are also expected to grow as major investors in the region are stepping up specialization to develop supply chains.

"I see the potential of the RCEP becoming an Asia-Pacific super supply chain," said Professor Lawrence Loh, director of the Center for Governance and Sustainability at the Business School of the National University of Singapore, adding that if any parts of the supply chain become disrupted, other countries can come in to patch it up.

As the biggest free trade agreement ever forged, the RCEP will ultimately create a very powerful method that could be a role model for many other free trade areas and free trade agreements worldwide, the professor said.

Gu Qingyang, associate professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy of the National University of Singapore, told Xinhua that the vibrant dynamism of the region is also a strong attraction for economies outside the region, which is witnessing increasing investment.

Inclusive growth

The pact will also play an important role in narrowing the development gap and allowing for an inclusive and balanced sharing of prosperity.

According to a World Bank report published in February 2022, lower- and middle-income countries will see the biggest wage gains under the RCEP partnership.

Simulating the impact of the trade deal, the study found that real incomes could grow by as much as 5 percent in Vietnam and Malaysia, and as many as 27 million more people will enter the middle-income group by 2035.

Undersecretary of State and Spokesman of the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce Penn Sovicheat said the RCEP could help Cambodia graduate from its least-developed country status as soon as 2028.

The RCEP is a catalyst for long-term and sustainable trade growth, and the trade pact is a magnet to attract more foreign direct investments to his country, he told Xinhua. "More FDIs mean more new capital and more new job opportunities for our people," he said.

The kingdom, known for its agricultural products such as milled rice, and manufactured garments and shoes, stands to gain from the RCEP in terms of further diversifying its exports and integrating into the regional and global economy, the official said.

Michael Chai Woon Chew, deputy secretary-general of the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia, told Xinhua that the transfer of technology and production capacity from more developed countries to the less developed is a significant benefit of the trade deal.

"It helps to increase the economic output, improve income levels, and enhance purchasing power to buy more goods and services from more developed economies and vice-versa," Chai said.

As the world's second-largest economy with strong consumption capacity and powerful production and innovation potential, China will provide an anchor mechanism for the RCEP, said Loh.

"There's a lot to gain for all parties concerned," he said, adding that the RCEP has diverse economies in different stages of development, so stronger economies like China can help the emerging ones while the stronger economies can also benefit from the process due to new demand by the new markets.

XINHUA

Agreement injects impetus into Asia-Pacific trade

NANNING — While most people were enjoying a good rest to usher in the New Year, warehouses in Guangxi Wuzhou Rixin Plastics Industrial Co Ltd were moving into top gear for a new consignment of exports.

Nearly 80,000 plastic clothes pegs and hangers were being packed in the company in Wuzhou, South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. These products had been shipped to Japan right after the New Year holiday.

"We've maintained trade with companies from Japan, Malaysia and Singapore for years. In 2022, we applied for 218 certificates of origin under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and enjoyed a tariff reduction of about 250,000 yuan ($36,850), which significantly strengthened the competitiveness of our products," said Gan Huizhen, the general manager.

The RCEP has reduced export costs, enabled the company's products to have greater price advantages and increased the number of its overseas orders by 15 percent year-on-year, Gan added.

The RCEP agreement, which entered into force on Jan 1, 2022, comprises 15 Asia-Pacific countries, including 10 ASEAN member states and five major trading partners — China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

From January to November of last year, China's trade with other RCEP members expanded 7.9 percent year-on-year to 11.8 trillion yuan, accounting for 30.7 percent of China's total foreign trade value, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

Gu Xueming, head of the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation under the Ministry of Commerce, said since its entry into force, the RCEP agreement has had a positive impact on regional economic development.

"The economic and trade cooperation between China and other RCEP member countries has achieved remarkable results. The RCEP has played an important role in stabilizing foreign trade and foreign investment, helping enterprises expand the global market," Gu said.

In the first 11 months of 2022, Nanning Customs in Guangxi issued 1,696 certificates of origin under the RCEP, with a value of 754 million yuan.

The average import tariff of relevant parts imported from Japan and South Korea by machinery manufacturer Guangxi Liugong Machinery Co Ltd has dropped from 6 percent to 4.8 percent, which has helped the company effectively reduce its overall operating costs and thus improve and optimize the level of machinery manufacturing.

"In the first 11 months of 2022, we sold nearly 20,000 complete machines overseas. Over 4,000 sets were sold to RCEP member states, registering an increase of 50 percent from a year ago," said Du Pengqing, the company's overseas strategy director.

"The signing and implementation of the RCEP agreement will make important contributions to regional and global trade, investment growth and economic recovery," said Hong Junjie, vice-president of the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing.

Hong added that the RCEP has built a good platform for regional cooperation, which fully reflects the common interests of all RCEP parties and their confidence and determination to uphold multilateralism and free trade.

With the RCEP, "we have seen the commitment of member countries trying to liberalize and facilitate trade as well as the facilitation of regional supply chain", said Auramon Supthaweethum, director-general of the Department of Trade Negotiations under Thailand's Ministry of Commerce, adding that the RCEP has helped enhance the country's trade with other member countries, which accounts for around 60 percent of Thailand's total foreign trade volume.



Containerships berth at the Qinzhou Port in Qinzhou, South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, in September. ZHANG AILIN / XINHUA

Shu Jueting, China's MOC spokeswoman, said that more efforts will be made to promote the high-quality implementation of the RCEP and other free trade agreements, make full use of such agreements and improve their comprehensive utilization efficiency.

The ministry will also conclude free trade agreements with more trading partners, further open China's trade in goods, services and investment markets, and take an active part in negotiations on new rules for the digital economy and environmental protection, Shu said.

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COMMENT

Editorials

Continued diplomatic tradition shows China-Africa bond of brotherhood

The ongoing visit of Foreign Minister Qin Gang to Ethiopia, Gabon, Angola, Benin, Egypt, the African Union headquarters and the League of Arab States headquarters from Monday to Jan 16 represents the 33rd consecutive year that Africa has been the destination for the Chinese foreign ministers' first overseas trip of the year.

This diplomatic tradition fully demonstrates the unbreakable and sincere friendship between China and Africa. No matter how the international situation changes, China's endeavor to strengthen ties with African countries remains unchanged.

Qin's visit, judging from its length and scope, is set to deepen the China-Africa comprehensive strategic partnership in an all-round manner. The cooperation between the two sides does not target any third party, and China and Africa welcome all major players on the world stage, including the United States, to work with them to promote the common development of Africa.

But Qin, who was previously the Chinese ambassador to the US, will be well aware that Washington is attempting to sow the seeds of discord between African countries and China, and that the continent has never been a priority in the US' diplomacy.

It is China's rise that has provided African countries with opportunities to secure positions in the global industry and supply chains by making the most of their comparative advantages of labor costs and resources. Sino-African cooperation brings about win-win results, and all of China's cooperation projects with African countries are aimed at resolving the structural issues hindering their development. These range from improving infrastructure to enhancing the quality of the labor force. Rather than short-term speculative interests, these projects invariably focus on long-term mutual benefits and improving people's livelihoods. It is the uncertainty of returns on investment and the long period of delay before any are forthcoming that has deterred most Western investors from making Africa part of their business plans, as they care more about quick money instead of the needs of the African people.

In the congratulatory message on the 20th anniversary of its founding that he sent to the African Union on Sept 9 last year, President Xi Jinping called for continuously upgrading Sino-African cooperation in the fields of public health, food security, digital and green economy, aerospace and cross-regional infrastructure construction. By helping to usher in a new development stage for African countries, China is also making contributions to address the global governance and development deficits.

It is believed that Qin's visit, his first overseas trip since he took up the position on Dec 30, will help further advance this cause. And what makes it hard for the US to drive a wedge between China and Africa is not only the bonds of brotherhood that have been forged between the two sides thanks to their similar historical experience of colonial exploitation, but also the efficiency, sustainability and potential of their pragmatic cooperation today.

Germany should be realistic in its China policy

In a recent interview with the German newspaper Handelsblatt, Chinese Ambassador to Germany Wu Ken expressed serious concern about the new, reportedly tougher China strategy the German government is working on, and which may soon be finalized.

He said that from what he had been told, the so-called Internal Guidelines on China being compiled by the German Economy Ministry are "guided by ideology" and exaggerate the competition and confrontation between the two countries in a way that has nothing to do with reality. This, he rightly said, is "very disconcerting", as the guidelines, supposedly meant to address past German "naivety" and reduce the country's dependence on China, point to a strategic shift away from China.

Calls for such a shift have encountered a more receptive audience in Germany as a result of the redistribution of power within the German government and the hostilities between Russia and Ukraine, which have prompted Germany to more closely align itself with "like-minded" allies such as the United States. Although this means Germany is "forfeiting its independence" as Wu noted.

The Joe Biden administration has taken the opportunity of the Ukraine crisis it has triggered and is maintaining, and the subsequent political struggles within the German government and public opinion, to put pressure on Germany to fall in line with its confrontational national security strategy.

It remains to be seen what the German government's new China strategy will look like in the end thanks to different views within the government.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has expressed his opposition to "decoupling" on many occasions, and stated he is willing to continue to deepen economic and trade cooperation with China and to work with it to create more opportunities for enterprises in the two countries. The German Chamber of Commerce has also said "decoupling away from China is not a desired outcome". It has urged the German government to continue support for German companies in China.

But there have been growing calls within the German government and society to restrict German enterprises' investment in China and prohibit Chinese enterprises from investing in key sectors of the German economy.

The touchstone for the development of relations between Germany and China has always been their mutual respect and understanding.

The future development of China-Germany relations depends on the extent to which Germany can clarify its perspective of China by decoupling it from the distorting influence of the US.

And that is true not just for the world's fourth-largest economy, but equally applicable to every economy that is in the process of, or considering re-evaluating and readjusting relations, economic or political or both, with China.

Political paralysis looms after House speaker fiasco

Republican Congressman Kevin McCarthy was elected speaker of the United States House of Representatives early on Saturday, after making extensive concessions to right-wing hardliners in his party. McCarthy's victory in the 15th ballot ended the deepest congressional dysfunction in over 160 years. But it sharply illustrated the difficulties he will face in leading a narrow and deeply polarized majority.

What this drama on Capitol Hill exposes is the political instability that will have an impact on the future of the United States and interests of its people.

The fact that McCarthy was elected only after agreeing to a demand by hard-liners that any lawmaker can call for his removal at any time makes it very difficult for him to exercise his power as speaker. Which means legislation will be very hard to be passed on critical issues such as funding the government, addressing the nation's looming debt ceiling and other crises that may arise.

In addition, the main tool for the speaker, on behalf of the majority, in controlling the House floor is the Rules Committee, which sets the terms of legislative debate, including which bills can be considered, for how long and — crucially — what amendments may be offered and by whom.

As part of McCarthy's compromise with the dissidents, he agreed to give the ultraconservative wing of the Republican Party approval power over one-third of the Republican members of the panel. In effect, that gives the extreme faction the ability to block any legislation it does not like from the floor, by banding together with Democrats on the panel who are all but certain to oppose most Republican bills.

Some Republicans might be inclined to vote for spending bills and a debt ceiling increase, not wanting to see a government shutdown or a debt default. They would have an incentive to work with Democrats on bipartisan deals that could make it through the Senate to President Joe Biden's desk.

But in the past couple of decades, Republican speakers have followed an unofficial, but hard-and-fast rule — known as the Hastert Rule — for the GOP speaker to not put forward any legislation that does not have the support of a majority of the majority. That means if conservatives are not on board, a bipartisan deal can never see the light of day on the floor.

As a result, under the new speaker, Congress will in all likelihood be a paralyzed one, and even the speaker himself runs the risk of being removed if he ever angers the right-wing faction.

The problem is that very few politicians in Washington are willing to put the interest of their country and people before that of the political factions that have an inordinate influence on US politics. This is exactly the root cause of this crisis around the election of the house speaker, and also the root cause of the political instability the country faces.

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Luo Jie



Opinion Line

Washington's abuse of monetary and fiscal policies in spotlight

The US Federal Reserve released minutes of its December monetary policy meeting, in which Fed officials reiterated their determination to curb inflation. The Fed was even willing to risk rising unemployment and slowing economic growth to bring inflation back to its long-run target of 2 percent, casting a shadow on the outlook for the world economy.

Although the Fed has adopted a hawkish stance, according to analyses, it just wants to be "politically correct" while being unconcerned about the obvious risk of recession.

That means the Fed will remain tough until inflation slows down substantially, and shift its stance in the event of a crisis to act as a market "savior". In this way, the Fed is attempting to put itself in an "invincible" position while turning a blind eye to the impact on the United States and world economy.

The moves provide an insight into the abuse of the US' monetary and fiscal policies. The measures have also caused problems for the global economy.

At a recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, more than 3,700 companies from more than 170 countries and regions displayed innovative technologies and products, including electric vehicles, digital healthcare, artificial intelligence, robotics, food technology, and smart homes. Digital technologies such as big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence have accelerated deep integration with the real economy, promoting industrial reform and the rapid development of digital products consumption, e-commerce, remote work mode and digital platform construction. This has substantially adjusted traditional manufacturing and service industries and will inject new impetus into world economic growth.

The pandemic has accelerated digital transformation, demonstrating the digital economy's development potential and resilience against headwinds. No wonder many countries are formulating strategies for its development. However, it should be noted that some countries represented by the US are obsessed with the establishment of a scientific and technological "high wall" and the implementation of a technological blockade, blocking the normal development of the digital economy.

Such short-sighted behavior is bound to have a negative impact on global innovation cooperation, scientific and technological exchanges, and industry and supply chains.

As the growth momentum of developed economies such as the US and Europe continues to weaken, all parties should focus on technological innovation and cooperation.

— ECONOMIC DAILY

Firecrackers, consensus and festival safety

On the eve of Spring Festival, on Jan 30 last year, Jishuitan Hospital in Beijing, which specializes in treating burns and external injuries, received just two patients with burn injuries from firecrackers, a huge drop from 25 in 2021.

Of course, it was because in 2022 Beijing prohibited firecrackers during Spring Festival. While reducing noise pollution, the move also saved people from injuries.

It is heartening to see the Beijing municipal government's recent announcement about continuing the policy in 2023. When it comes to securing people's lives and health, a ban on firecrackers is never too tight.

Besides health, there are several other reasons why the ban is worth supporting. As a city with a 3,000-year history that served as capital under five dynasties, Beijing has a large number of ancient buildings. Firecrackers pose a big challenge to these buildings, and banning them is one way of protecting the capital's architectural heritage.

Besides, Beijing has finally improved its air quality, getting rid of the heavy smog, thanks to efforts from all sides, factories included. There is no reason to allow firecrackers to bring the smog back.

On Sunday, Dongying in Shandong province, Dalian in Liaoning province and Yanchuan in Shaanxi province announced that firecrackers will be allowed in certain areas during the festival, but then the conditions there are different. Dongying, for example, has a small population and it will be possible to minimize the danger from firecrackers.

Therefore, the policy allowing each city to make its own decisions is suitable. However, it should be noted that persuasion is an important part of the policy-making process, and that municipal governments need to explain their decision to the public. However, those breaking rules by burning firecrackers at the wrong place or time should be punished.

— ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Copybook interventionism of US in Brazil

Less than a week after Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva took office, thousands of protesters unsatisfied with the presidential election result and supporters of Lula's predecessor, far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro, took to the streets in Brasilia on the afternoon of Sunday, attacking the buildings of Brazilian congress, presidential residence and supreme court.

Their clashes with the police and other law enforcers, and the chaos they have created unavoidably remind the world of those who stormed Capitol Hill in Washington about two years ago in a vain attempt to overturn the presidential election result. No wonder a piece in The Atlantic magazine published on Monday said that the onslaught on the Capitol set a bad example for the rest of the world.

All violent behaviors should be condemned by reasonable minds, and cannot be tolerated in any civilized society. But the fierce criticism of the unrest in Brazil by the Joe Biden administration is in order to put pressure on the Republicans, particularly former US president Donald Trump and his supporters.

But both the condemning of the violence in Brazil by the Democrats and the studied silence of the Republicans ignore the fact that the United States is partly responsible for the socioeconomic problems and governance challenges confronting Latin American countries, including Brazil, today.

For too long, the US has regarded Latin America as its backyard, and interfered in the internal affairs of countries in the region.

Its historical assistance to the Latin Americans to fight against colonialism — a de facto process for the US to try and eradicate Spain and Portugal's influence in the region as well as implant puppet regimes — has undoubtedly evolved into a new form of colonialism.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said he will urge US President Joe Biden to put an end to the US' interventionist policies in the region during the North American Leaders' Summit in Mexico City on Tuesday, which reflects the common voice of the region.

The riot in Brasilia should also serve to awaken other Latin American countries to the fact that their countries will remain an appendage to the US if they continue to pin hopes on the US for development and modernization, as the latter has never truly cared about their interests, and on the contrary is keeping them in a chronic state of underdevelopment as this is in line with the US' interests.

Cooking a frog in warm water does not create a comfort zone. There is no future for the frog although it may enjoy the warmth for a time. Instead, that warmth robs it of the independent will to try and change its fate.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

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COMMENT

Martin Sieff

Unleashed travel will boost trade

China's lifting of quarantine requirements for arrivals should be welcomed by its neighbors and trading partners. Travel and international trade certainly do not guarantee global peace and increasing prosperity, but they are both almost always huge and necessary steps toward achieving and sustaining those goals.

Travel restrictions to prevent the spread of the exceptionally contagious COVID-19 virus were certainly necessary. But because of the continually reducing potency of successive waves of the virus and the global use of new vaccines and their concomitant booster shots developed to protect against it, the threat posed by the disease has been reduced to a degree thought inconceivable three years ago.

However, in the current grim, deteriorating state of relations between the West and China, even the most constructive of measures are seized on to be misrepresented and twisted in order to make cheap political points.

Any efforts to restrict the free movement of Chinese citizens and goods around the world in the coming year would certainly fit into that cynical and destructive category.

The global economy desperately needs to attract a new wave of Chinese trade and investment so that China can once again fulfil its great constructive role as the main engine driving rising world prosperity and growth that it has so dramatically fulfilled over the past two decades, especially across Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. The rapid growth in trade and deepening of ties between Beijing and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states is a most welcome and vital development in that direction.

China has consistently proven itself to be a reliable, loyal and predictable partner ready to invest in and partner with countries around the world with no regard for ideological differences or different forms of government.

Similarly, in the context of the Ukraine conflict and continuing tensions between the United States and China, nothing is more important for world peace than to rapidly increase personal travel and interactions in the broad business and tourism fields to create a far more positive climate for renewed diplomatic discussions and interactions.

Major nations across Asia from Japan and the Republic of Korea to Vietnam and India have made clear they see no future in subscribing to the Biden administration's fantasy of a zero-sum contest across the Pacific between Washington and Beijing. Neither does the government of China. The sooner that dangerous delusion is laid to rest, the better.

For the nations of the developing world across Latin America and Africa, the need to attract a new wave of Chinese investment to jump-start their stalled and failing economies is more pressing than ever. Outside the think tanks of Washington and London, the whole world knows that China is not in the business of seeking to destabilize governments and societies around the world in the spurious garb of ideology clothed in the false rhetoric of protecting human rights or spreading democracy.

China has consistently proven itself to be a reliable, loyal and predictable partner ready to invest in and partner with countries around the world with no regard for ideological differences or different forms of government. In a world of nearly 8 billion human beings and well over 200 sovereign nation states and independent political entities this is, indeed, the only realistic path to preserve long-term peace and conditions for global development and prosperity.

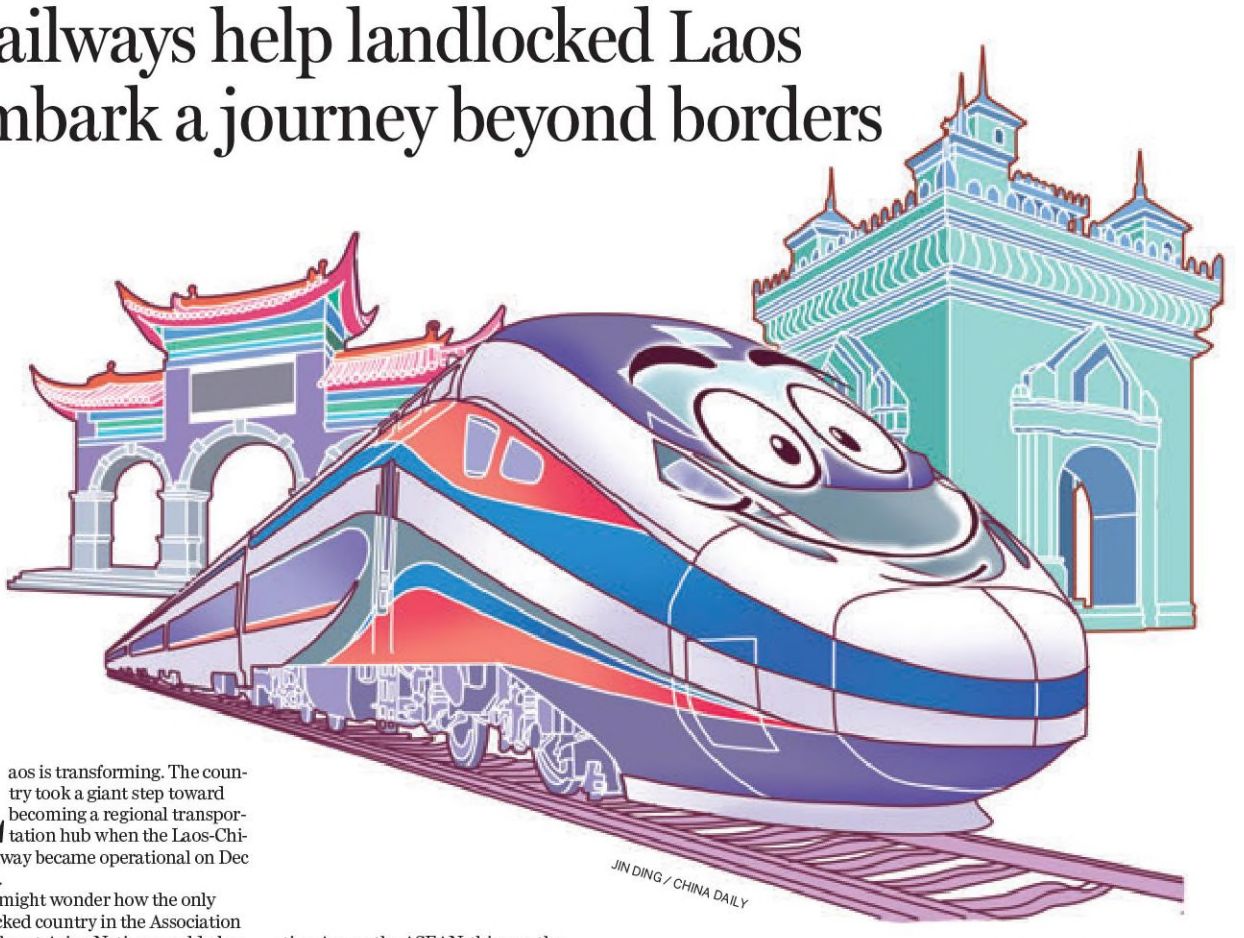
Once again, Beijing has taken a constructive, wise and encouraging initiative to revive world trade and encourage renewed ties and understanding between peoples as well as their governments. Other major nations and national blocs should respond positively to this move. Instead of tit-for-tat destructive responses by nations to each other's provocations, the peoples of the world enter 2023 hoping for a new escalating cycle of positive reactions that contribute to reducing hatreds and tensions and increasing investment, understanding and true tolerance.

There have been encouraging signs in different parts of the world that some long-standing leaders recognize the need for longer-term statesmanship instead of grandstanding with cheap insults and demagogic accusations and lies on the international stage. But honeyed words by themselves are never enough and China, like many other nations, has had enough experience of empty words coming out of Washington's leaders and politicians that are not backed by the hard collateral of positive actions. A rapid positive response to China's latest optimized pandemic protocol after the long COVID-19 health crisis would be a very good place to start.

The author is a senior fellow at the American University in Moscow. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Kouqing Li, Chanthevivanh Keobounphanh and Naoaki Inayoshi

Railways help landlocked Laos embark a journey beyond borders



JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

Laos is transforming. The country took a giant step toward becoming a regional transportation hub when the Laos-China Railway became operational on Dec 3, 2021.

One might wonder how the only landlocked country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations could play such a pivotal role in regional transportation. Well, let us guide you through Laos's exciting transformation, based on our experience and observation while travelling on the railway.

The Laos-China Railway is the first railway system in Laos, covering a distance of about 400 kilometers between the Laotian capital of Vientiane and Boten, a city in northern Laos bordering China. Connected to the railway network in China, the $5.9 billion mega-infrastructure project was built in cooperation with China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative and is operated by the Laos-China Railway Company.

Until trains started running, roads used to play the most crucial role in transporting cargo and people in the country. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic drastically reduced transportation in Laos, highways, expressways and roads in general accounted for about 90 percent of the freight traffic and 63 percent of passenger traffic while the rest was conducted through waterways and airways.

However, poor road quality has been a long-standing challenge for Laos. As of 2020, only 23 percent of Laos's roads were paved. Plus, they are still vulnerable to seasonal closures due to floods, landslides and poor drainage systems. In the 2018 Logistics Performance Index, Laos was ranked 82 among 160 countries for its performance in logistics. Across the ASEAN, this was the third-lowest position, followed by Cambodia and Myanmar.

The Laos-China Railway could help Laos overcome its logistics infrastructure challenges, especially because the new railway and infrastructure have significantly reduced transportation time and cost. For instance, the railway has reduced the travelling time between Vientiane and Luang Prabang — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — from six hours by road to two hours by train.

Now that the travel time between Vientiane and Luang Prabang has reduced, Laos can look forward to enjoying a tourism boom. Tourism is a pillar of the Laotian economy along with mining and electricity. It benefits other service industries such as restaurants and hotels and is a significant source of foreign-exchange earnings.

For tourists, general travellers and travel agencies, connectivity is an important factor. The Laos-China Railway has increased the options of tourists and travel agents to explore Laos, turning it into a major tourist destination in Southeast Asia. There is likely to be a big jump in the number of tourists from Vientiane visiting Luan Prabang and other scenic spots by train. Also, since the Laos railway is connected to the railway network in China, the number of tourists is likely to increase further now that China has reopened its borders after almost three years.

In the 10 months since its launch, the Laos-China Railway has carried about 8 million passengers and 5.7 million tons of cargo, including 1.4 million tons of cross-border cargo. During our trip last September, the train seats were fully booked for the round-trip between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The sharp increase in rail transportation has greatly improved connectivity in Laos, because railways, unlike roads and other transport means, could be less vulnerable to weather disruptions and seasonal closures.

The railways have unlocked Laos's potential to become a regional transportation hub by changing the country's transportation landscape. Yet Laos should not be complacent due to the progress it has made in railway transport.

For instance, the ticketing system could be improved, making booking tickets easier. If people could book tickets online, or through travel agents, long queues at the ticket counter could be avoided.

The number of trains running daily could also increase to boost cargo and passenger transportation. Currently, there are only three trains carrying passengers, which can be expanded over time as demand increases.

The linkage with other logistics channels such as road networks, dry ports and airports could be strengthened. Optimizing and synergizing these channels could create a more convenient, faster, modern, efficient, and cost-effective transportation system.

Hard and soft infrastructures could be developed to enhance connectivity with the transportation networks in neighboring countries. The railway needs to be connected with the transportation network beyond Laos to sustain its key role in the region.

The investment climate could also be improved to attract more domestic and foreign investments along the railways, which in turn could improve the railway's usability and encourage further economic activity.

Laos may be the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, but that does not mean it should remain isolated. Its location is strategic in terms of the region's transportation network. With the opening of the Laos-China Railway, Laos has embarked on a journey that will transport the country and the region beyond its borders.

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

Jiang Yiyi and Gao Ziyi

Accelerator pressed for recovery of the tourism sector

China downgraded its COVID-19 prevention and control measures from Category A to Category B from Sunday, and scrapped the circuit breakers for international flights to ensure Chinese people can travel abroad. This essentially means the authorities have pressed the "acceleration button" for the recovery of the tourism industry which has been in a temporary coma for three years. Category B measures mean free movement of people but not the end of the pandemic.

This major policy decision is a turning point for China's domestic and foreign tourism. In fact, the Ministry of Transport has said it will gradually resume international road transport services for passengers following restoration of passenger entry and exit services at dry ports on Jan 8. The National Immigration Administration, too, announced the optimization of the immigration management policy and measures from Jan 8. The NIA has also resumed the issuing and approval of ordinary passports for Chinese citizens traveling abroad in an orderly manner, as well as restarted processing visas for Chinese mainland residents traveling to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region for leisure or business.

People's pent-up urge to travel is very strong. Searches for "outbound travel" and "visa" skyrocketed on many online travel platforms including Ctrip, Tongcheng and Qunar. With the implementation of related policies, and airlines increasing their operating capacity, the supply and demand of air tickets, both domestic and foreign, will gradually return to normal and the overall price of international tickets will decrease to the pre-pandemic level. And inbound and outbound air travel is likely to peak during the summer vacation.

The domestic tourism industry, which is dominated by popular theme parks and tour of cities, will be the first to see an increase in tourist flow.

Over the past three years, to cope with the impacts of the pandemic, the vast majority of travel companies have downsized their staff and reduced their operations to survive. Also, a considerable number of them have either gone out of business or are semi-closed. Therefore, travel companies still have a lot of preparation, promotion and warm-up to do to capitalize on the government's move which is expected to hasten the tourism sector's recovery.

First, the travel companies should be realistic and closely watch the policy trends and changes, make foolproof plans, reasonably invest funds, sensibly utilize human and other resources, and increase their operational capacity according to their respective conditions. At the same time, tourism facilities such as scenic spots, star-rated hotels and cable cars should carry out thorough safety risk and infrastructure investigations in strict accordance with specific rules, and take measures to eliminate the potential safety hazards to fortify their operations with a blueprint for dealing with emergencies.

Second, related parties should carefully study and judge the demand for travel, continuously improve and update tourism products, strive to create personalized, complex and professional high-quality leisure and entertainment products, upgrade their services and avoid blindly developing tourism business by wasting resources.

Over the past few years, the travel market has seen some structural changes, especially because of the pandemic. The upstream and downstream of the tourism industry chains have undergone drastic changes. Facing consumers with more diverse travel habits and demands, digital transformation and industrial integration have become part of the tourism sector's mainstream.

Also, the tourism industry should actively promote cross-industry integration, cooperate with the cultural, healthcare, technology and education sectors, as well as the media, and further explore multi-element fusion products and business models such as intellectual property and research and development.

The global health emergency is not over, and infections in China are on the rise. And due to the differences in the flow of people, population density and immunity levels, the peak time of the epidemic will vary from place to place. As a result, the recovery of the tourism sector in different regions will depend on the epidemic situation.

Besides, the recovery of the tourism industry is a dynamic process. The tourism industry will take time to overcome the obstacles created by the reduction in people's incomes or the psychological buffer period required to emerge from the impacts of the epidemic. And on the supply side, travel companies will need time to replace the loss of experienced and seasoned personnel.

The tourism industry will more likely than not recover in sequences. The domestic tourism industry, which is dominated by popular theme parks and tour of cities, will be the first to see an increase in tourist flow. With the tourism sector expected to benefit from the Spring Festival Golden Week holiday, the domestic tourism industry will gradually recover first, and popular tourist cities in Hainan, Sichuan, Yunnan and Jilin provinces are likely to see a flood of tourists ahead of other Chinese cities.

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GLOBAL VIEWS



SHI YUMENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

CAI FANG

Spending power

Enabling migrant workers to become permanent urban residents key to boosting economic growth

China is moving toward negative population growth, and the size of working-age population is set to shrink at a faster rate, which will aggravate the labor shortage, and drive down the potential economic growth rate. To address the worsening aging problem, China needs to take more drastic reform measures to boost its economic growth.

The overall population decline will also have a major impact on the demand side since the shrinking population will lead on to less consumption, dragging economic growth.

Although the negative growth of the population is inevitable, some countermeasures can be taken to alleviate the impact it will have on the society and economy. The new-type of urbanization, of which the central task is to enable the large number of migrant workers to become urban residents, can help release this group's huge consumption potential, and raise productivity by transferring the rural labor force to non-agricultural sectors.

The country's demographic challenges also come from the rapidly aging population. Data released by the National Statistics Bureau in 2021 showed that China has shifted from an aging society, defined as the share of 65 and older above 7 percent, to an aged society, defined as the elderly's share being above 14 percent. According to estimates of the United Nations, China will enter a highly aged society defined as the elderly's share going beyond 21 percent around 2030.

It marks a new demographic infection point for China. Past experience suggests a demographic turning point will also be a turning point for economic development, and bring new challenges to the country's economy.

The negative growth of the population will deliver shocks to economic development on both the supply side and demand side.

In 2011, China already saw a demographic turning point, when the size of the working population, or people aged between 15 and 59, began declining, which pushed up the labor costs of enterprises, and eroded the country's comparative advantages in labor-intensive industries. Since then, the manufacturing sector's share in the Chinese economy has been on the decline and the contribution rate of exports to economic growth has dropped.

The decline in the number of new laborers has slowed the improvement of the quality of the labor force. And the shrinking labor pool has also propelled enterprises to replace human workers with capital and machines at a faster pace, which has led to diminishing returns for capital.

In addition, the decreasing labor force has resulted in a slower transfer of rural laborers to urban areas, dragging down the growth in productivity as the transfer of rural labor force to cities could optimize resource allocation.

All these factors together herald lower potential economic growth.

Facts have proved that China's real economic growth rate over the past decade has been hovering around the estimated potential growth rate: the decline of potential growth rate since 2011 was followed by the drop in real growth rate in subsequent years.

At the same time, the imminent new demographic turning point is expected to exert a bigger impact on the supply side. Since 2011, the country's working population has been shrinking in a steady manner, providing a buffer period. But the shrinking of the work force will accelerate once the total population starts decreasing, which will pose graver challenges to the economy.

Apart from slower potential economic growth, the demographic shift will also have a strong influence on the demand side.

Population growth is correlated with consumption since people are consumers. It is the so-called total population effect.

The income level of China's seniors is lower than that of the working-age population, and the country is still plagued by uneven distribution of and insufficiency in social security resources. The elderly in China have concerns when spending money: they worry about not only their own future, but also that of their children and grandchildren. Therefore, they are more reluctant to spend compared with younger people. This is the "age structure effect".

Despite the fact that a declining population is inevitable, the country can take steps to reduce the income gaps among different groups of people. Generally speaking, people with lower incomes are more inclined to spend their increased earnings on consumption compared with richer people.

Despite the fact that a declining population is inevitable, the country can take steps to reduce the income gaps among different groups of people. Generally speaking, people with lower incomes are more inclined to spend their increased earnings on consumption compared with richer people.

Therefore, to optimize the income distribution and expand consumption demand, the challenge mainly comes from the consumption side. Striving for "common prosperity" and smoothing "domestic circulation" necessitate fostering a huge middle-income group, and thus forming a super-large domestic market.

One approach is to advance the people-centered urbanization, of which the primary task is to turn rural migrant workers into urban residents. It is an important source of reform dividends from the supply side and demand side. China's Gini coefficient stands at the alarmingly high level of 0.468, of which about half can be ascribed to the urban-rural income gap. And thus, to bridge the urban-rural divide will help narrow the overall income gap.

In addition, on the supply side, labor shortage is one key reason behind the decelerating economic growth. Although the working-age population is shrinking, China still has a large reserve of surplus rural labor.

China's population employed in agriculture accounts for 23 percent of the total labor force, much higher than the average level of many developed countries, which is 3 to 4 percent. As China approaches the threshold of a high-income nation, the country faces the challenge of absorbing about 20 percent of the labor force now making a living in agriculture into the urban economy. Therefore, China's labor shortage can be alleviated by transferring rural labor from the agricultural sector to non-farming sectors. And this shift from lower productivity sectors to higher productivity sectors will help raise the overall productivity of the economy.

Currently, the country's urbanization rate is 65 percent, but the share of people with permanent urban residence stands at only 47 percent. The majority of those living in cities with no permanent residence status are migrant workers and their families. To give them access to the same public services enjoyed by other urban residents will be a key challenge for China to unlock the huge consumption potential of the population.

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CAO YUANZHENG

Rising headwinds

Restructuring of the global economic landscape poses challenges for Chinese economy

The sanctions on Russia imposed by the US-led Western countries in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine crisis and Russian counter-sanctions have not only wreaked havoc on the international economic and trade order, but also greatly undermined the institutional foundation of economic globalization. The rules-based global multilateral governance system established after World War II is retrogressing toward the geopolitics-based economic arrangements before the crisis. The global economic landscape is undergoing unprecedented profound adjustments, with the theme of the times shifting from "peace and development" toward "security and development".

The global economy has displayed two trends — the "small-yard, high-fence" strategy based on values and a restructuring of industrial chains prioritizing security. There are three different multilateral circles with different institutional arrangements in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region — the 11 members of the already existing Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership led by Japan, the 15 member countries of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the "Indo-Pacific" Economic Framework for Prosperity spearheaded by the United States.

The US has also introduced its Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, etc., which aim at promoting industrial chains to flow back to the US through subsidies or punishments and relocating production in countries or regions that supposedly share the same values as the US.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to a surge in energy and food prices across the world, pushing the global economy toward stagflation. It is likely that the global economy will experience a recession in 2023. Major international organizations have all substantially lowered their global GDP growth projections for 2022 and 2023. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that about one-third of the world economy faces two consecutive quarters of negative growth. For many people, "2023 will feel like a recession" due to price hikes and squeezed real incomes.

With the impacts from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is witnessing an interaction process between industrial restructuring and the geopolitical restructuring, which poses grave challenges to the Chinese economy that is deeply integrated into economic globalization.

China's economic performance fell short of expectations in 2022, with a GDP growth rate lower than the government's annual target for the first time and lower than other major Asian economies for the first time since 1990. This presents a stern test for a country that is striving to avoid the "middle-income trap". The Chinese government has taken a slew of measures to prop up growth, such as using strong growth in exports to cushion the impact of sluggish growth in consumption and using strong growth in infrastructure investment to cushion the impact of shrinking property investment. However, due to the global economic downward pressures and weakness in infrastructure investment, this approach is difficult to sustain. In 2023, China has to take strong, effective measures to revive growth.

A restructuring of the global industrial landscape is not only a result of de-globalization endeavors, but also brings about new opportunities arising from new arrangements of globalization.

To start with, the global industrial chain is clustering at the central region of Eurasia, making the Belt and Road Initiative all the more significant. Along the Belt and Road routes, there already exist two multilateral international cooperation mechanisms — APEC and the RCEP. China is a major member of both mechanisms, playing a pivotal role. Furthermore, China has a gigantic manufacturing industry, making it possible for the country to strengthen and complement the industrial chains along the Belt and Road routes. As a matter of fact, the sanctions and counter-sanctions in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict have made developing economies more aware of the importance of defending their own interests, instead of picking sides. This has been quite evident in the proposed expansion of APEC and BRICS membership and the first China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit — which decided to establish and strengthen the China-GCC strategic partnership. Moreover, infrastructure connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative has made tremendous progress and is constantly making new headway.

Second, China should go all out to invest in the low-carbon economy and make it a priority for consumption expansion, as well as a significant way of offsetting the adverse effects of a possible "decoupling". Against the backdrop of a historic downturn in property investment and sluggish growth in government-led infrastructure investment, the low-carbon economy is a promising investment field for China. Compared with high-tech sectors such as the chip industry, China has no tech gap with the United States in the low-carbon economy and is leading the world in areas of supply-side wind and solar power technologies and demand-side new energy vehicles and battery technologies. The US-led Western countries have no advantage in the low-carbon technological competition. On the contrary, both countries and the world at large think this is an area that calls for greater cooperation between the two sides.

Third, China should make policy preparations for financial risks brought by a historic downturn in the property sector. It's predicted that the Chinese population will witness negative growth starting from 2022, marking an end to the era of rigid absolute demand in the property sector brought by the sustained increase of the population. Rapid changes on the demand side could result in severe adjustments on the supply side, as well as rapid financial deleveraging. The property sector accounts for 16 percent of Chinese GDP. A flagging property sector, combined with its upstream and downstream sectors, has a huge impact on the broader economy.

Last, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has dealt a heavy blow to the global financial markets, among which the wild fluctuations in US dollar index calls for special attention. The US dollar index came into being after the Bretton Woods system was abolished in 1973 and the US dollar was unpegged from gold. In history, the three sharp rises and declines in the US dollar index have all dealt a heavy blow to the global economy. A sharp rise in US dollar index not only caused currency and debt crises for developing economies, but also resulted in changes to the international currency structure and financial turmoil. According to the IMF and the World Bank estimates, currently, lots of economies, such as Argentina, Turkiye, Lebanon, Nepal, Cambodia, Pakistan and Peru, are facing the risk of debt defaults. China is the largest creditor of a number of these economies, and this presents the biggest external risk to the Chinese economy.

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LIFE

> After more than 35 years with my guitar, I have grown as a person and as an artist. I know the guitar better than before, and I feel I have my own voice on it."
>
> **Yang Xuefei,** guitarist



Strings of inspiration

Classical guitarist Yang Xuefei is set to tour the country with her new album, **Chen Nan** reports.

Like many other artists, classical guitarist Yang Xuefei was scheduled to tour different countries, recording new albums and performing in front of live audiences. However, in the past three years, she had to change her plans frequently due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It was very depressing to reschedule over and over again. I tried hard to cheer myself up and adjust to the 'new normal'," says Yang.

A way to cope with the situation for her was to listen to some classics that she grew up with, and play them.

"I hadn't listened to some such pieces for years because I was always looking for new music. But I found them very comforting, especially during this difficult time," says Yang.

The enjoyment inspired Yang to record a new album, titled *Guitar Favourites*, which was released on Nov 24 by the Decca label. The album was recorded and produced at the London Abbey Road Studios in April.

Yang's new album puts together a personal selection of music — 22 pieces — showcasing her career and ranges from the music she played as a young girl to audience favorites she performed countless times onstage earlier.

"The guitar feels like a lifelong companion to me. After more than 35 years with my guitar, I have grown as a person and as an artist. I know the guitar better than before, and I feel I have my own voice on it," says Yang. "I want more people to fall in love with this beautiful instrument. I feel it's time to return to the quintessential guitar music that first drew me, and many others, to its spell."

The album opens with *Asturias* (*Leyenda*), one of the best-known compositions of Spanish composer Isaac Albeniz. Yang played that piece as a child.

"It's a very beautiful music piece that takes people into the world of classical guitar," says Yang.

When she was 9 years old, Yang went to a concert of one of her favorite classical guitarists John Williams in Beijing, where Williams played that music.

In her new album, Yang also plays *When the Birds Return*, composed by Williams. She calls Williams her "mentor".

"When I was a student of the middle school affiliated to the Central Conservatory of Music, I once went to a workshop by Williams in Beijing. He inspired me and encouraged me to renew my ambition to become a professional guitarist," recalls Yang.

When Williams heard her play, he gave two of his own instruments to Yang's school, one especially for her.

However, it was also a time when Yang was lost and confused about her future. Because she was the first and only student in the school learning classical guitar back then, she felt lonely. Compared to other Western musical instruments, such as the piano or the violin, which were popular among Chinese music learners, the guitar seemed to be a minority taste.





Clockwise from top: Yang Xuefei records her new album in London in April. Yang poses in front of the London Abbey Road Studios. Her new album showcases her musical journey. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

She says when she decided to pursue a career as a classical guitarist, it was a risky choice, as few in the country had done so before.

"Though it was not a popular instrument, the sound's magical quality kept surprising me," recalls Yang.

Yang also recorded *Fandango* (from *Tres Piezas Espanolas*) in her new album, paying tribute to the Spanish composer Joaquin Rodrigo. The song carries special significance for Yang. When she was a teenager, Yang had her debut concert in Madrid, as part of her tour of Spain and Portugal. The composer came to her concert and Yang performed *Fandango*.

"The composer was over 90 years old and he came to the concert with his daughter. He was blind so he couldn't see me playing the music piece. When his daughter told him that it was a 14-year-old girl from China playing his music piece, he was very surprised," recalls Yang.

Born in Beijing in 1977, Yang went on to become the first musician from China to receive a full scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London in 2002. As a soloist, she tours worldwide and has been living in London for 20 years. Her international success has led her to play in more than 50 countries at numerous prestigious venues such as the Royal Albert Hall in London and Carnegie Hall in New York.

"When I learned to play the instrument, my goal was to play the notes correctly. But as I grew up and launched a professional career, what I wanted to achieve was to build a dialogue with people from different cultures through my music," says Yang, adding that years of touring allowed her not only to gain a wide knowledge about the world but also gave her a more vivid perspective on her own cultural background.

In 2020, she released an album, titled *Sketches of China*, which is her first album of Chinese music.

In her new album, she has also recorded her first composition, *Xinjiang Fantasy*, a work based on traditional folksongs of the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

"I have been intrigued by Xinjiang folk music and musical instruments such as the hand-held drum and *dombra* (a two-string plucked instrument). When I wrote the song, I used my guitar to imitate the sounds of those instruments," says Yang. "I played the music piece several times when I toured in the country last year and the feedback of the audience was great. So I decided to record it in the new album."

Other works featured in her new album include *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* by Spanish composer and guitarist Francisco Tarrega, which Yang first played at age 10, and *La Catedral* by Paraguayan composer Agustin Barrios Mangore, which Yang played in the final of a major guitar competition in Beijing when she was 11, competing against adult musicians.

Yang will launch a tour for her new album in January, which will take her to Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, Kunming, Yunnan province, Quanzhou, Fujian province, and Shanghai, among other Chinese cities, through February.

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Volunteers offer help during surge in COVID

GUIYANG — Despite wintertime, a team of volunteers is delivering medicine in Nanxiyuan community in Guiyang, Southwest China's Guizhou province.

Nanxiyuan community is home to 1,060 relocated residents from seven townships in Huaxi district in the city. Among the residents, more than 300 are elderly or have disabilities.

During the country's campaign to eliminate absolute poverty, relocation was a typical way to get locals out of poverty by moving them from mountainous areas to more suitable places for living.

Wei Yuanfen, 36, is a relocated resident in Nanxiyuan community. She stays at home to look after her two children, with one, who is 13 years old, suffering from a mental disability.

Her children had fever in recent days due to COVID-19 infections, and Wei had no suitable medicine. "The fever didn't go away," Wei says.

> I am always on call for any activities in the community, and I hope every volunteer service from me can bring warmth to the ones in need."
>
> **Tuo Zhenni,** volunteer

The volunteers delivered medicine to her home.

Last June, the community organized a volunteers group and invited Party members and university students to get involved in the community's management, especially for COVID-19 prevention and control measures.

"Over the past few days, some residents have been infected with the virus and had symptoms such as fever and cough, but some families had trouble going out and buying medicine," says Song Changju, an official in the community.

Song says more than 100 volunteers delivered medicine, antigen test kits, and daily necessities, such as food and oil. At the entrance of the community clinic, some volunteers distributed traditional Chinese medicine to residents for free.

Yao Xiaoxie, 21, is one of the volunteers. Three years ago, Yao and his mother were relocated to the community. Yao's mother cannot hear, so the community workers often visit the family to offer help.

Last September, when Guiyang was baffled by the rapid rise of infections, Yao became a volunteer and helped to deliver food and supplies daily. Sometimes, he could only rest for two or three hours a night, but he never complained.

Volunteers are also vital in delivering medicine to relocated residents in need in Longsheng community, a resettlement site in Tongren, Guizhou.

Most middle-aged residents work outside the province, leaving behind the elderly and children.

Tuo Zhenni, a volunteer from the post-1990 generation decided to deliver medicine to neighbors. She says they are like "a big family" and it is necessary to "look out for each other when someone needs help".

"I am always on call for any activities in the community, and I hope every volunteer service from me can bring warmth to the ones in need," says Tuo.

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LIFE

Notable additions

China becomes destination of choice for young, foreign musicians, as symphony orchestras around the country welcome new members, many of whom were part of the first graduating class of Tianjin Juilliard School, **Chen Nan** reports.

The growing interest in classical music among Chinese people successfully proves that China holds the key to the future of the genre. As more and more concert halls pop up and new symphony orchestras are established in the country, the extraordinary growth of China's classical music market is also having an impact on the global musical community.

Young musicians from around the world are looking increasingly to China when planning their careers.

South Korean violist Jeong Ji-soo is one of the new members joining the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra, which just celebrated its 40th birthday last year.

"I always wanted to audition for a Chinese symphony orchestra. There were many more audition opportunities than I had expected and it was really tough to choose exactly which orchestras I would audition for," recalls Jeong, who started playing the violin at the age of 5 and later studied the viola during high school.

In 2020, she moved to China to join in the graduate program of the Tianjin Juilliard School, studying with violist Honggang Li of the Shanghai Quartet after graduating from the Yonsei University's College of Music.

When the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra announced that it had viola positions available, she knew immediately that she wanted to audition for it, relishing the thought of life in the Guangdong province metropolis.

"The food in Shenzhen is a bit similar to my home in Seoul and I had prior interest in this city, so that was one of the biggest reasons I chose to audition there," says Jeong. "When I auditioned, I was as nervous as at any other audition I had taken. However, I felt so much more prepared after spending one year at the Tianjin Juilliard studying with my professors Sheila Browne and Honggang Li. When I was onstage, I felt nervous, excited, challenged, and so many other emotions all at once. I did my best and I was happy with my performance. After I learned that I had won the spot, I couldn't believe it!"

Besides Jeong, Kim Min-joo, a cellist from South Korea, and three Chinese students, French horn players Xu Ruifeng, Wang Haifeng and double bass player Sun Zimo, all graduates of the Tianjin school, joined the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra as new members. On Dec 31, when the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra held its annual New Year concert at Shenzhen Concert Hall, Xu and Wang performed with the orchestra for the first time.

Jeong was the first student of the Tianjin school who was recruited by a Chinese symphony orchestra. She received her letter of admission in February and finished her study at the Tianjin school before starting work with the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra.







Clockwise from top: Bethany Lawrence (second from right, third row from the back) performs in a concert with Tianjin Juilliard Orchestra as its principal oboist on Dec 9, 2021; double bass player Zhang Daxun, resident faculty member at the Tianjin Juilliard, in a rehearsal with his student Sun Zimo; Xu Ruifeng (left) rehearses with his teacher, French horn player Chang Chou Han. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

She adds that she was so proud and immediately called her teachers and friends. "It's like a dream and I felt rewarded and happy about my growth. I'm very thankful. I feel that I have been able to develop a lot through this audition," she says.

The violist also says that moving to China has been one of the coolest adventures in her life. Everything is totally new to her. She has had many opportunities to explore the different regions of the country. "One thing I learned is that it is big, like really big, and there is no single culture that defines the entire country," says Jeong.

"During the 1980s and 1990s, many music majors from South Korea chose to study in the United States and Europe. Many of them decided to return to South Korea and became new blood for local symphony orchestras," says He Wei, CEO and artistic director of the Tianjin Juilliard School.

"Now, the rise of classical music in China is apparent to see and many international students consider China as a great opportunity to launch their careers. We hope that more students from around the world will be able to work and stay in China."

The Tianjin school, located alongside the city's Haihe River, is the first overseas campus of the New York-based Juilliard School. The Tianjin school's first graduate studies program was launched in the fall of 2020 amid the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year, 33 students graduated from the Tianjin school's graduate studies program and one-third of them joined in Chinese symphony orchestras, including many international students, according to He.

Oboist Bethany Lawrence, originally from Houston in the US, is one of the graduates from the Tianjin school. She says that studying in China is her very first experience living outside Texas. After graduation, she joined Shanghai Opera House Orchestra as its second principal oboist.

"I started rehearsing and performing with the group in September 2022. It's been fun so far. We perform a very diverse repertoire, including operas, opera excerpts, song cycles, and concertos from a wide range of time periods and traditions, and I am enjoying this level of diversity," says Lawrence, who started learning the oboe at age 11 when she joined a band program at school. "Shanghai is a beautiful and fascinating city. I'm happy to be here.

"One thing that became apparent when I arrived in China is the growing amount of professional opportunities here. The number of Chinese orchestras has increased by 80 in recent years, and that made me curious about possible career opportunities for myself in a place with growing public interest in classical music," she explains.

"I have always been a person who has focused more on journeys than destinations, so I am happy to see where this journey takes me."

During her time at the Tianjin school, she studied with the school's resident faculty member Scott Bell, who had worked with the Pittsburgh Symphony for a long time.

"The most important thing for me in coming to Tianjin was to stay open-minded and just roll with the punches. I knew from the interactions I had with my professor and classmates that this could be a life-changing opportunity, so long as I stayed open to change and opportunity," she recalls of her experience at the school.

"My time at the Tianjin Juilliard presented me directly with very significant career opportunities, as well as the ability to take advantage of them."

After graduating from the Tianjin Juilliard, violinist Ler Ler Ma moved to Suzhou, Jiangsu province, in October to work with the Suzhou Symphony Orchestra, a young and dynamic orchestra inaugurated in 2016. She decided to take the job in Suzhou as there are currently no openings in her native Singapore.

"We've had a few concerts in a row and a few were canceled due to the pandemic, but the concert season should be resuming now. It has been great meeting new people and working in an orchestra professionally," says Ma.

The violinist had never been to Tianjin before she studied there. She chose to study there because of the Shanghai Quartet — one of the world's foremost chamber ensembles — and the reputation of the Juilliard School.

"The biggest gain those two years (at the Tianjin school) has been the abundance of performance opportunities and the bonds between the students and the teachers. In this contained community, a sense of musical identity is cultivated," Ma says. "I sometimes send pictures or videos to my family back in Singapore and post about my life on social media. As a result, many of them have developed a positive impression of Tianjin and want to visit."

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Health workers striving around the clock in COVID fight

TIANJIN — On Dec 30, Shen Runkun, a doctor at an emergency center in North China's Tianjin, started work at 7 am and was rushed off her feet the whole day.

Lately, a rise in COVID-19 infections in the city has significantly increased the workload of Shen and her coworkers at the Tianjin Medical Emergency Center, who now seem to be making nonstop ambulance journeys.

To ensure that patients infected with COVID-19 can be treated as early as possible, staff at the emergency center have been working overtime. Often, they can only squeeze in takeout meals during short breaks between ambulance callouts.

On one ambulance trip on Dec 30, Shen picked up a 50-year-old patient at a nursing home. Bedridden for a long time with a severe underlying medical condition, the patient had developed a pulmonary infection.

While en route to the nursing home, Shen made some inquiries about the patient's condition. About 13 minutes after the pickup, the ambulance arrived at the Second Hospital of Tianjin Medical University, where emergency physicians performed a more comprehensive examination and treatment.





Left: Xie Yanjie (front), a doctor working with the 120 medical emergency ambulance, carries a patient on a stretcher with colleagues down the stairs of an old building without elevators in Tianjin in late December. **Right:** Xie inquires about, and records, a patient's condition in the back of a Tianjin Medical Emergency Center ambulance. PHOTOS BY ZHAO ZISHUO / XINHUA

"My colleagues have all stayed on the front line. Even if some fall ill, they don't complain and keep working. We hope to overcome the difficulties by working together," Shen says.

According to Li Shanglun, director of the emergency center, there are now 449 ambulances in the city.

"We have relatively abundant manpower. We have the confidence and ability to provide high-quality prehospital medical emergency services for our people in Tianjin," Li says.

As China continues its optimization of COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control measures, the country's antivirus focus has shifted to protecting health, and preventing and treating severe cases.

A combination of measures have been taken to boost access to medical treatment and drugs, improve health services for the elderly and other key groups, accelerate COVID-19 vaccination, and strengthen pandemic prevention and control in rural areas.

The Second Hospital of Tianjin Medical University, for its part, has set up a second emergency area, expanding the original 44 beds in the emergency room to 70 beds, and installed ventilators, transnasal high-flow oxygenators, infusion pumps and other equipment to ensure that patients with acute and critical illnesses have adequate resources for resuscitation, according to Chen Bing, vice-president of the hospital.

As part of nationwide efforts, the capacity of fever clinics at various levels is being strengthened.

As of Dec 25, the number of fever clinics in second-grade hospitals and above had reached 16,000 in China, while the number of such clinics in grassroots medical institutions totaled 41,000.

The community health service center of Zhangjiawo township in Tianjin's Xiqing district has a separate fever clinic with its own pharmacy.

"We now have sufficient medicine stocks," says Yang Yungui, director of the center.

According to Yang, a special fever medicine bank has been set up, which stores more than 40 types and over 10,000 boxes of anti-inflammatory and antiviral drugs, including those treating high temperatures, coughs and asthma.

"It can guarantee the supply for fever patients and patients with related symptoms for nearly a month," Yang says.

Primary-level medical and health institutions, like the one in Zhangjiawo, have handled nearly 60 percent of fever cases in Xiqing district, greatly relieving the pressure on secondary and tertiary hospitals, according to the Tianjin municipal health commission.

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SPORTS

YEAR-ENDER-TENNIS



Courting success as future stars serve notice

The coming year looks set to be a rewarding one for young hopefuls





China's Zheng Qinwen (left) spearheads a talented young group of players including Yuan Yue (center) and Wang Xiyu (right), who achieved major breakthroughs in 2022 on the Women's Tennis Association's professional tour, to rekindle fans' hopes for a resurgence of Chinese force in the women's game. AGENCIES

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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Confident, aggressive and never mince words on their ambitions.

China's next-gen tennis aces have set the hopes high for more major breakthroughs after making their presence felt on the world stage over a year of progress in 2022.

Highlighted by their deep runs at Grand Slam tournaments and rapid climbs on world rankings, a group of youngsters has carried Chinese tennis into a new era with their history-making performances over the past season boding well for a brighter future.

Leading the youthful surge was women's phenom Zheng Qinwen, a 20-year-old rising star, who was awarded the Newcomer of the Year by the Women's Tennis Association last month for her breakout 2022 campaign.

Starting from world No 143 at the beginning of last year, Zheng soon captured the world's attention by fighting into the fourth round at the French Open in May, followed by back-to-back third-round appearances at Wimbledon and the US Open before reaching her maiden WTA tour-level final in Tokyo in September to become the first Chinese teenager to do so.

The strong upswing in her first full season on the WTA circuit saw Zheng break into the world's top-25 in October, also the first Chinese teen to do so, after moving up over 100 places to complete one of the sharpest rises on ranking last year.

Boasting a blistering forehand, strong serve and movement beyond her size, Zheng, a five-foot-10 (1.78-meter) power hitter, produced a string of giant-killing upsets last year, such as her second-round win over Romania's former world No 1 Simona Halep at the clay major in Paris and a three-set defeat of 2019 US Open champion Bianca Andreescu of Canada in Toronto.

After a solid winter program at her off-season base in Barcelona, Zheng apparently has carried the momentum into the new season as she secured her seventh career win against a top-20 opponent on Jan 3 after beating 17th-ranked Anett Kontaveit of Estonia 2-1 in the opening round at a WTA event in Adelaide, Australia.

Buoyed by her season-opening win against a seeded player, Zheng set down a gauntlet to the rest of the tour that she has what it takes to further her inexorable rise.

"I always know that I have the level to beat all of them. It's just a problem I have to show it on court," Zheng, the current world No 30, said at her post-match press conference in Adelaide.

"A lot has happened last year. I've been playing all the Grand Slams, all the big matches. That gave me a lot of confidence and experience ready for this year to go fight for more.

"In 2023 I wish I can become a top 10 first, but it's a long way," Zheng said. "I still have a lot to improve, and I want to play match by match. Let's see what happens and when I can get there."

Zheng's rise to prominence eight years after two-time Grand Slam champion Li Na has excited the sport's community in China, where fans have been longing for the emergence of a new home star to cheer for. After winning two major singles titles at the 2011 French Open and 2014 Australian Open, Li rose to international stardom while triggering a tennis boom in China about a decade ago before she was forced to retire in 2014 by a knee injury.

Those joining Zheng to bolster the women's revival also include veteran Zhang Shuai, another young prospect Wang Xiyu and No 119 Yuan Yue, who all reached new heights in their respective campaigns last year.

As China's top ace at world No 24, the 33-year-old Zhang renewed her personal best at the US Open in September by reaching the fourth round to become only the second Chinese to go that far at all the four majors after Li.

She also won her third career singles title at a WTA 250 tournament in Lyon, France in March, and made her first WTA 1000 quarterfinal appearance in four years in Cincinnati, United States in August, defeating four-time major champion Naomi Osaka in the opening round.

As another intriguing young prospect alongside Zheng, Wang, 21, advanced into the third round at last year's US Open to prove that her 2018 girls' singles win at the same venue was not just a flash in the pan.

Previously competing on the lower-level ITF circuit, Yuan stepped up her game in 2022 to compete on the WTA tour. She also fought into the round of 32 at the Flushing Meadows all the way from the qualifying rounds to mark the first time four Chinese women had made it that far at a Slam together with Zheng, Zhang and Wang.

Led by the quartet, seven Chinese women finished the 2022 season within the world top 100 and all of them have qualified for the main draw of the 2023 Australian Open next week, making it the biggest Chinese contingent in history at the first Slam of the year.

"I'm not surprised they can do this because in China (there are) so many great players," veteran Zhang said of Chinese women's impressive 2022 campaign.

"The last two years with COVID or National Games they didn't come and travel and join the tour. That's why the last two years it looks like Chinese tennis is going down.

"But it doesn't mean we don't have good ones. So for sure they did a great job and we have a lot and maybe more coming."

2022 year in Review



Veteran Zhang Shuai is reviving her storied career after a solid 2022 campaign of impressive performances on the women's professional circuit. XINHUA

Building on net gains as relentless efforts finally paid off

By SUN XIAOCHEN

After trying to crack the top of the men's game for years, Chinese tennis has finally savored success with homegrown stars making major headlines for a fruitful season in 2022.

Defined by achievements on the women's circuit for more than a decade, Chinese tennis had its long-awaited dream of men's rise come true big time last year following Zhang Zhizhen's top-100 breakthrough and former US Open boys' champion Wu Yibing's revival on the major stage.

Zhang, a 26-year-old Shanghai native, etched his name into tennis history in October after he became the first male Chinese mainland player to reach the top 100 on the ATP world rankings following a quarterfinal run at an ATP 250 tournament in Italy.

With four solid wins, including two in the qualifying rounds, Zhang stormed into the last eight in Naples to earn his second career quarterfinal appearance at an ATP Tour-level event since his first in 2017 and rose to No 97 in the official rankings on Oct 24.

Zhang's top-100 breakthrough garnered resounding praise back home, with the Chinese Tennis Association hailing it as the "realization of a long-cherished dream".

"To reach the top 100 in men's professional tennis has been a target of Chinese players for generations," the CTA said in a congratulatory letter.

"Today, all the sweat and pain through the decades paid off after you helped Chinese tennis reach a new milestone.

"For sure, it will inspire an entire generation to march forward and embrace new challenges with confidence, discipline and resilience."

Ranked No 321 at the beginning of 2022, Zhang credited increasing competition from his peers and his own renewed commitment to the game for his surge.

"It cannot be done by just one player or one generation. It's the result of accumulated efforts after trying for decades," said Zhang, who made his professional debut in 2012.





Rising star Wu Yibing (left) and 97th-ranked Zhang Zhizhen are rebooting men's tennis in China after a progressive year. GETTY IMAGES

"Now is a great moment for Chinese men's tennis with several of us all competing in a healthy environment. We chase one after another on the court while staying quite close and motivating each other off the court," Zhang said of the collective progress of Chinese men, including 116th-ranked Wu Yibing and teen star Shang Juncheng, this season.

Considered the future of Chinese men's tennis after winning the US Open boys' title in 2017, Wu has taken five years to live up to the expectations generated by that junior success after he reached the last 32 at the US Open in September to become the first Chinese mainland man to go that far in New York.

It took former world No 1 Daniil Medvedev to stop Wu's 15-match winning streak in the third round at Flushing Meadows, yet the sparkling 40-7 win-loss record of the 23-year-old in 2022 and three consecutive titles won on the Challenger circuit for sure had offered him plenty to cheer about, given how far he's come.

Hampered by several injuries to his elbow, lower back and shoulder, Wu missed almost three years of competing on the ATP tour since early 2019 and only came back at the beginning of last year when he was far down the rankings.

Nominated for ATP Comeback Player of the Year last month, Wu was awarded a wild card on Jan 5 to enter the main draw at the 2023 Australian Open, joining Zhang, who qualified directly via rankings, to form a Chinese duo in a major tournament's singles main draw for only the second time after they did so at the US Open last year.

Hot on their heels is teenager Shang, who reached career-high ranking of No 184 in early November thanks to back-to-back final runs on the Challenger series prior to the US Open.

Shang, who turns 18 next month, also made history on his part in 2022 as he became the first and youngest Chinese man to appear in the main draw of an ATP Masters 1000 event at Indian Wells, California in March, following two qualifying wins.

The rise of the younger generation, facilitated by more professional training and greater international exposure, has garnered praise from their predecessors.

Wu Di was the first Chinese man to play a main-draw match at the Australian Open in 2013 and three years later was the first male Chinese mainland player to lift a Challenger singles trophy.

"In the past few years, Chinese men's tennis has been a bit silent, but this year the younger generation's performance gave all of us a big surprise especially at the US Open," said Wu Di.

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