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Sales to China keep aircraft maker ahead of Boeing

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Tech giants look to cloud for revenue diversification

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New goal in life

Club gives elderly a sense of belonging, proves that they are still young at heart

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CHINA DAILY

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Foreign Minister Qin Gang (center) walks on Tuesday with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (left) during their meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Qin is visiting five African nations — Ethiopia, Gabon, Angola, Benin and Egypt — as well as the headquarters of the African Union and the League of Arab States. ETHIOPIA PRIME MINISTER OFFICE VIA AFP See story, page 3

Official expects recovery in air travel this year

China's civil aviation authority is reviewing applications for resumption of intl flights

By LUO WANGSHU luowangshu@chinadaily.com.cn

China's civil aviation authority is reviewing applications for the resumption of international flights by Chinese and foreign airlines after the nation's recent optimization of COVID-19 control policies, an official from the Civil Aviation Administration of China said on Tuesday.

Liang Nan, director of the administration's department of transportation, said international travel is expected to accelerate in the second half of this year.

Li Xiaojin, a professor of aviation economics at Civil Aviation University in Tianjin, said the policy adjustment will boost the growth of the aviation market and the national economy.

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Strong potential of Sino-African ties to be tapped

Qin Gang, China's new foreign minister, will travel to five African countries — Ethiopia, Gabon, Angola, Benin and Egypt — on his first trip abroad after his appointment. The visit continues the long tradition of Africa being the destination for Chinese foreign ministers' first overseas trip of the year.

WORLD WATCH

By Nabil Fahmy

between China and Africa have seen a steady increase. In 2021, bilateral trade reached \$254 billion, a year-on-year increase of 35 percent. China continues to import oil, precious minerals and metals from Africa, but it is also increasingly importing agricultural products and manufactured goods.

hosted in Washington in December by United States President Joe Biden, who held a summit with African leaders in which he made political and economic commitments regarding Africa. These included support for a permanent seat for Africa on the United Nations Security Council, having the African Union as a member of the G20 and asking Congress to lend the International Monetary Fund \$21 billion to provide access to necessary financing for low- and middle-income countries, which should help Africa's recovery efforts and support projects that build resilience against future crises.

Economic cooperation will always constitute a substantial component of Chinese relations with developing countries, including African nations. Foreign Minister Qin's discussions with his counterparts will reflect this. At the same time, commensurate with China's expanding economic footprint, a widened political discussion is a natural consequence. On each stop, global and regional issues will be on the agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for global cooperation. The Ukraine crisis has again raised the specter of a new Cold War and a recalibration of the prevailing world order.

World Bank sees 4.3% growth for China in 2023

By ZHAO HUANXIN in Washington huanxinzhao@chinadailyusa.com

The World Bank has forecast China's economy to grow at 4.3 percent this year, then rise by 5 percent for 2024, the first major projection made after the country entered a new phase of COVID response.

Washington-based lender said in its Global Economic Prospects, released on Tuesday. It predicts gross domestic product expansion is set to slow in all major economies and regions except China.

Globally, growth is slowing sharply in the face of elevated inflation, higher interest rates, reduced investment, and disruptions caused by the conflict in Ukraine, with 2023 growth expected to slow to 1.7 percent from the 3 percent forecast six months ago.

That figure is 1.7 percentage points higher than the projected global average at 2.7 percent, according to IMF's World Economic Outlook. The World Bank noted that its baseline projections assume an uneven reopening in China accompanied by recurring COVID-19 outbreaks and economic disruptions, which it says could reduce China's growth relative to the baseline by 0.5 percentage point.

INSIDE COVID prompts nation to bolster its food security Global Views, page 13

DIGITAL HUMANS MAKE THEIR MARK IN REAL LIFE Virtual stars in demand for TV shows and online platforms By DENG ZHANGYU dengzhangyu@chinadaily.com.cn

Festive preparations



Workers make preparations on Tuesday for the Nice Carnival in Nice, France. The annual festival, which is generally held in late February or early March, is one of the three best-known carnivals in the world. CYRIL DODERGNY / MAXPPP

www.chinadailyglobal.com Newsstand prices: US \$1, Canada C\$1, UK £1, EU €1, Kenya 50 Kenya Shilling, Asia Pacific: Thailand 120, Philippines 120 php, Myanmar 2000 kyat, Japan 210 yen, Dubai 10 dirham, Pakistan 300 rupee

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TIANYU, a virtual star, is modeled on the Flying Apsaras, a motif on murals at the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, Gansu province.

LUOTIANYI, a virtual singer, is the most popular such celebrity on the Bilibili short-video sharing platform.

DONGFANG AI, a virtual anchor, performs during Dragon TV's New Year gala. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ART BY LU PING / CHINA DAILY

DIGITAL: YOUNG AUDIENCES TARGETED

From page 1

A virtual rock band caught the eye at a concert staged by Sichuan Television to mark the arrival of 2023. The band comprises five digital avatars based on cultural relics found at the Sanxingdui site in Deyang, Sichuan province, which is known for its exotic-looking bronze statues.

Ma Yuqi, joint director of the concert, said the band's appearance was designed to attract as many young audience members as possible.

The appearance of virtual beings at New Year galas staged by TV stations and online platforms reflects just how popular these figures have become in China in the past 12 months. The concept of the metaverse — where the physical world combines with the virtual — has also gained traction in recent years.

According to a report on the virtual people industry last year released by the consultancy company iiMedia Research in April, the estimated market scale of virtual humans was some 12.08 billion yuan (\$176 million) and will reach about 20.52 billion yuan this year.

The report said digital beings are now used widely in the entertainment and cultural sectors as icons, anchors and employees. In China, this boom is largely driven by Generation Z — those born in the late 1990s or early 2000s, who are seen as being familiar with digital technology, the internet, and social media from a young age.

Ji Zhihui, who has observed the industry for more than a decade, said Generation Z members matured as the Chinese economy and technology developed rapidly. As a result, this group has taken to online activities such as watching videos, listening to music, and making friends. Generation Z comprises the majority of the metaverse's future residents, Ji said. "In the future, internet users will migrate to the virtual world," Ji added.

Wider audience

One of China's leading streaming platforms, iQiyi, was among the first companies to invest in virtual beings.

Two years ago, it launched a virtual idol talent show, *Dimension Nova*, aimed at introducing such idols to a wider audience. The show generated popular hashtags that were viewed more than 1.2 billion times in two months on the Sina Weibo micro-blogging platform.

On New Year's Eve, iQiyi staged Retaland, a virtual concert in four parts based on various themes. The performers were

all virtual idols, and one of them was created from the image of popular star Gong Jun, known for his role in a martial arts TV series. According to iQiyi, the concert was aimed mainly at Generation Z.

Lu Bin, head of a virtual idol studio affiliated with iQiyi, said: "Followers of these idols are mostly young people who grow up with anime, comics and games. Those younger than 24 account for the majority of this group."

The studio, which was set up in 2021, has signed more than a dozen digital beings, including band members, anchors and influencers.

One of the studio's star performers, D.M, features twin siblings Damian and Millie. The former is a handsome rapper, while the latter is a cool street dancer. They have their own accounts on numerous social media platforms, and perform at concerts and art shows.

A-Soul, a virtual girl group created by Yue Hua Entertainment, a leading celebrity agent in China, comprises five members, each of whom has a distinctive style. Members of the group have millions of followers on social media platforms, and they have been in high demand on Bilibili, a short-video sharing platform especially popular with Generation Z.

In 2019, Bilibili launched a section for virtual influencers, including anchors and idols. Chen Rui, the company's CEO, said at a meeting in November that the platform is home to the most virtual



influencers worldwide. More than 230,000 virtual anchors broadcast music, dance and game videos to audiences mainly in the 18 to 35 age group. The air time of virtual influencers on the platform last year surged by 200 percent year-on-year.

Luo Tianyi, a virtual singer who debuted 10 years ago, is the most popular such celebrity on Bilibili. Luo's fans compose music, write songs and draw illustrations for her — contributing greatly to developing the digital avatar's personality.

At a cultural event to celebrate the Beijing Winter Olympics in February, Luo sang the song *Time to Shine* while wearing a light blue *qipao*, which gave her exposure to a wider audience. According to media reports, some 30 virtual celebrities took part in activities related to the Winter Olympics in the Chinese capital, including a digital avatar of champion freestyle skier Gu Ailing.

Unlike Luo, whose image is largely based on animation, many of her coun-

terparts look like real people.

For example, Tianyu, modeled on the Flying Apsaras, a motif on murals at the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, Gansu province, has won more than 3.5 million followers since debuting in April last year on the short-video platform Douyin. Many netizens said they could not tell whether Tianyu was a real person or not.

A clip of Tianyu on Douyin lasting less than two minutes garnered nearly 2 million likes. In the footage, she helps a popular TV actress fight a bad guy.

Tianyu's stunning beauty and stylish clothes are inspired by elements of traditional Chinese culture. The virtual star can play the *pipa* (a four-stringed instrument) and perform *jin* dance (a unique dance style in ancient China).

Zheng Yicheng, who manages the studio in which Tianyu was created, described the virtual being as "the beacon to spread Chinese culture to the world".

Tianyu has received many invitations to film advertisements for brands, including one in which she collaborates with an electric car company. Zheng said a number of cities have also invited Tianyu to act as an ambassador to help promote culture and tourism.

Policy support

The boom in virtual avatars has been accompanied by policy support from the central and local governments.

In October 2021, the National Radio and Television Administration announced a plan to promote the wider application of virtual anchors and animated presenters in news broadcasts, weather forecasts, variety shows, and science and education programs.

As a result, numerous media outlets have hired digital employees as reporters, hosts and anchors. Many of these employees have reported on major events.

In May last year, the State Council introduced a regulation to encourage the use of digital technologies to promote Chinese culture.

Three months later, Beijing announced a detailed plan to transform its virtual people industry into a market worth more than 50 billion yuan by 2025. The plan encourages the use of virtual people in variety shows, concerts, livestreaming and film productions. It is the first city-level plan to focus on this emerging industry.

In October, the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China called for "a national cultural digitalization strategy", viewed by many observers as a catalyst to the booming virtual beings industry.

Cultural organizations, art institutions and cities were quick to create their own digital ambassadors or virtual spokespeople.

Last year, the China National Museum welcomed its first digital employee, Ai Wenwen, who works in different departments at the institution to learn about art collections, art displays and the research of cultural relics to prepare for museum-related work in cyberspace.

In June, the Ninth Qin Opera Art Festival in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, launched a virtual spokeswoman who can sing Qinqiang Opera.

This art form, which originated in the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-771 BC), continues to thrive in a vast area of Northwest China. In 2006, it was added to the nation's intangible cultural heritage list.

Chen Shaofeng, a professor of cultural industries research at Peking University, said the mushrooming growth of digital humans in the cultural industry is an inevitable trend that will provide a good and innovative service for the public.

"With highly developed technologies, the cultural sector will largely embrace the virtual world. It's a challenge for us all. We should think about how to work with these virtual beings to offer a better service," Chen added.



Left: Virtual band D.M appears at an arts festival in Qinhuangdao, Hebei province. Right: A virtual rock band performs on Sichuan Television. The group comprises five digital avatars based on cultural relics found at the Sanxingdui site in Deyang, Sichuan province, which is known for its exotic-looking bronze statues. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



TOP NEWS

Deadly storm



A car is stuck in a sinkhole on Tuesday in the Chatsworth neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, United States. Sinkholes swallowed vehicles, and torrential rain flooded towns and swept away a boy on Tuesday as a catastrophic storm battered California. The National Weather Service said that strong storms were possible in Northern California over the next couple of days. JAE C. HONG / AP

Africa's well-being high on agenda of Qin's visit

By ZHANG YUNBI
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Peace in conflict-hit areas, mutual respect and pragmatic cooperation are high on the agenda of the visit to Ethiopia and the African Union's headquarters by Qin Gang, China's new foreign minister.

Ethiopia is the first leg of Qin's Africa tour — his first trip abroad as foreign minister — from Monday to Jan 16. Qin is also scheduled to visit four other African nations — Gabon, Angola, Benin and Egypt.

Observers said Qin's visit not only gives a needed boost to political and economic ties, but also displays Beijing's unchanged commitment to much-needed peace and prosperity in Africa.

On Wednesday, Qin held the eighth strategic dialogue between China and the African Union with Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairman of the African Union Commission, at the organization's headquarters in Addis Ababa.

Qin reaffirmed Beijing's support for the AU joining the G20, saying that China is ready to further champion the interests of the vast number of developing countries.

“Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, China-Africa teamwork on BRI has shown strong resilience and vitality, and it continues to move forward, bringing real benefits to Africa's development.”

He Wenping, senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of West-Asian and African Studies

Faki praised China's support for Africa, particularly in areas such as the continent's integration and interconnectivity.

Both Qin and Faki also attended the project completion ceremony

of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

The project is another highlight of China-Africa cooperation, and China never writes a “blank check”, Qin said, noting that China will transfer the headquarters to African friends and the AU will take charge of its operations.

The building is a testimony of China's always supporting Africa with tangible actions, he added.

At a news conference in Addis Ababa on Tuesday, Qin reaffirmed China's commitment to its Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa, which was first proposed by the nation at the beginning of last year to support countries seeking security and prosperity in the conflict-hit region.

China has provided food, vaccines and other humanitarian aid to Ethiopia, and it “will continue to do so” and actively participate in the reconstruction of conflict-affected areas, Qin said.

China calls on the international community to increase humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia and support the reconstruction and socioeconomic development of

affected areas, he added.

On Tuesday, Qin met Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and also had a meeting with Demeke Mekonnen Hassen, the nation's deputy prime minister and foreign minister.

The two countries have been actively co-building the Belt and Road, and China has remained the largest source of foreign direct investment and the largest trade partner of Ethiopia for several years.

He Wenping, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of West-Asian and African Studies, said, “Development is the most important and hottest issue for African countries”.

The Belt and Road Initiative, first proposed by China as early as 2013, now includes almost the entire African continent, she noted.

“Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, China-Africa teamwork on BRI has shown strong resilience and vitality, and it continues to move forward, bringing real benefits to Africa's development,” she added.

However, the pursuit of an expanding African-Chinese cooperative landscape should not be contained by the competitive sensitivities of others. Rather, it should be essentially driven by mutual interests and a cooperative win-win, long-term strategic perspective, as well as a strong, unwavering determination to pursue greater understanding between our peoples and communities. Qin's visit to the five African nations can be a good example in this regard.

The author is former foreign minister of Egypt and a visiting senior fellow at Peking University's Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Trip: Mutual interests crucial to cooperation

From page 1

China's perspectives will be on the minds of Qin's hosts. Responding to Africa's debt and poverty challenges will have prominence, as will how China can help Africa realize the transition to cleaner energy while pursuing robust development. This will include not only traditional infrastructure projects but also issues such as digitalization and cybersecurity.

Each stop will also have its own political, security and economic issues. Egypt was the first African country to establish diplomatic

relations with China, in May 1956, and discussions there will naturally include the general security and stability of the Middle East as well as North and East Africa, including maritime security. Unresolved water management issues related to the Renaissance Dam on the River Nile, and relations with Ethiopia will be prominent in the discussions. Enhancing military and security cooperation will also be a topic, as will economic development.

Needless to say, invigorated Chinese foreign engagement attracts the attention of many global players. This was the case

when President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia to meet with Arab leaders recently, soon after Biden had embarked on a similar visit. Qin's Africa visit will be closely watched by the Biden administration, which sees China as attempting to expand its influence in Africa to challenge the prevailing international order.

Competition between China and the US is a source of increasing concern. I expect this anxiety to increase with every success, and countermeasures to be pursued. This is a reality that Africa and China cannot and should not ignore.

Growth: ‘Positive surprises’ in China

From page 1

A quicker-than-expected recovery in the country's real estate sector is another upside possibility, it added.

What the World Bank expects as “positive surprises” seem to have found solid footing to become a reality on the ground in China, which has kicked off a 40-day holiday travel period, starting on Saturday through Feb 15.

Guo Shuqing, chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, said China will make its prudent monetary policy more targeted and effective to facilitate the overall recovery and improvement of

its economy.

“Converting the current total income into consumption and investment to the maximum extent possible is the key to faster economic recovery and high-quality growth, and financial services have a lot to offer in the process,” Guo was quoted by Xinhua as saying on Sunday.

The annual Central Economic Work Conference held in mid-December in Beijing has made arrangements to defuse and prevent risks in the realty sector and ensure its healthy development, highlighting the principle that “housing is for living in, not for speculation”.

The meeting, which set the

economic tone for 2023, also reaffirmed the country's resolve on opening up at a higher level, including by ramping up efforts to widen market access and promote the opening-up of modern service industries.

Gary Hufbauer, a senior fellow and trade expert at the Peterson Institute for International Economics expects Chinese business activities to intensify across the border.

“There's no evidence that China is walking away from foreign markets,” Hufbauer told China Daily. “Now that the COVID lockdowns are phasing out, I expect Chinese production and exports to pick up in 2023.”

Jan Hatzius, chief economist for

Goldman Sachs, said on Wednesday that China economists at the financial institution now expect a “kind of V-shaped recovery” as has been seen in many other economies that have shut down because of COVID.

“We're now looking for 2.6 percent, after 2.6 percent in 2022, we have 5.2 percent growth for China this year,” Hatzius said at a webinar hosted by the Atlantic Council.

He said that the sharp acceleration does not mean that the longer-term economic issues and challenges in demographics and the property market have gone away.

“I expect property activity to come down very substantially in coming decades; that's going to be a long-lasting drag. But notwithstanding that, I think in the short term, we can see a pretty strong recovery,” he said.

China to further open economy, unleash potential

High-quality reforms expected to allow nation to join more major free trade pacts, experts say

By LIU ZHIHUA and ZHONG NAN

China is expected to pursue greater domestic reforms and tariff cuts as it strives to join important international trade agreements and unleash the potential of high-level economic opening-up, experts and business executives said.

They also believe China will strengthen economic ties with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand to accelerate regional economic integration.

The implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement at the start of last year has propelled China to liberalize and better facilitate trade and investment, improving the country's preparedness to align with high-level global trade rules.

However, high-standard free trade pacts — such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership that China is seeking to join — have greater levels of openness for countries that want to join it, analysts said.

When compared with the RCEP, the CPTPP has more openness in sectors such as State-owned enterprises and designated monopolies, labor standards, transparency and environmental standards, said Chen Jianqi, a professor at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (National Academy of Governance).

The CPTPP also involves reduced tariffs and more restrictions on subsidies, he said. “To expand high-standard opening-up for the next phase, China will likely focus on measures like pursuing high-level tariff reduction and even elimination,” said Chen.

China's negative list approach, which restricts and prohibits foreign investment in stipulated sectors and industries, may need to be extended to other areas to provide foreign businesses more access to Chinese market. Chen said this will “not only expand openness in trade in goods, but also increasingly raise openness in services and the investment sectors”.

China will also likely include in new free trade agreements provisions on issues that have not been extensively covered in FTAs already signed. These issues could include the digital economy, environmental protection, labor standards, competition policies and anti-corruption measures, Chen said. The country is also expected to deepen domestic reforms to align with high-standard international economic and trade rules, he added.

The recent Central Economic Work Conference, which set the economic tone for the year, called for greater efforts to attract and utilize foreign capital, widen market access, promote the opening-up of modern service industries, and grant foreign-funded enterprises national treatment.

China will actively seek to join high-standard economic and trade agreements such as the CPTPP and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement, the conference said.

A report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October said China will steadily expand institutional opening-up with regard to rules, regulations, management and standards.

Huo Jianguo, vice-chairman of the China Society for World Trade Organization Studies, said greater

openness, in particular in the services industry, is imperative for China to better attract foreign investment and drive economic growth. This goal is especially important as the nation's economy is facing increased uncertainties in overseas demand, more protectionism, and the spill-over effects of tightening monetary policies in developed economies.

China's openness in sectors including telecommunication, finance, insurance, e-commerce and State-owned Enterprises, is expected to be expanded to better align with high-standard international practices, he said.

More measures to facilitate investment are also likely in order to protect the interests of foreign investors. The measures are expected to include enabling foreign companies to have the same rights as Chinese companies and dismantling practices that hinder the operations of foreign enterprises.

“To expand high-standard opening-up for the next phase, China will likely focus on pursuing high-level tariff reduction and even elimination.”

Chen Jianqi, professor at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China

Hiroshi Hamaguchi, chairman and president of Astellas China, said he is impressed by China's efforts to grant foreign-funded enterprises national treatment.

“We will continue to leverage China's favorable policies. ... Our efforts will continue in clinical trials, new drug applications and commercial launches,” he said.

China is also expected to make greater efforts to strengthen economic and trade relations with Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand to accelerate regional economic integration.

“The economic integration between China and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has made remarkable progress, as characterized by closer cooperation on industrial and supply chains,” said Zhang Yansheng, chief researcher at the China Center for International Economic Exchanges.

“Closer ties among China, Japan and South Korea will shore up regional capacities in markets, technology and key (manufacturing) components to upgrade the market and manufacturing networks in the RCEP region to accelerate the shifting of the world economic center to Asia,” he said, adding countries should think more of economics than politics to expand common interests.

Huo said China and the four countries have firm and mutual economic reliance on each other. For example, China needs energy and high-tech manufactured goods and investment from them, while they need China's supersized market.

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A visitor tries South Korean cosmetics at the 19th China-ASEAN Expo in Nanning, capital of Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, on Sept 18. ZHANG AILIN / XINHUA

CHINA

Cool bunny



Tourists admire a 3-meter-tall ice sculpture in the shape of a dragon-riding rabbit at Longqing Gorge in Beijing on Tuesday. The scenic area kicked off an ice lantern carnival ahead of the upcoming Year of the Rabbit. PAN ZHIWANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Authorities reinforce action on those committing bribery

Discipline watchdog calls for building atmosphere for upholding integrity

By YANG ZEKUN
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The top discipline watchdog of the Communist Party of China in its latest communique stressed intensified punishment for those who commit bribery in order to foster and promote a better atmosphere of upholding integrity and resisting corruption.

The communique adopted at the second plenary session of the 20th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, which was held in Beijing from Monday to Tuesday, required disciplinary authorities to investigate new and hidden forms of corruption in the ongoing anti-corruption campaign.

While addressing the opening of the plenary session on Monday, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, urged taking simultaneous, coordinated and comprehensive steps to ensure that officials do not have the audacity, opportunity or desire to become corrupt.

The report to the 20th CPC National Congress, which was held in October, also asked the authorities to punish both bribe takers and

givers and combat new and disguised forms of corruption.

Xiao Pei, deputy head of the CCDI, said during the 20th CPC National Congress that corruption damages the political and economic ecosystems and fighting corruption is conducive to purifying those ecosystems.

"Bribe takers and givers engage in trading power and money, which is an important cause for the spread of corruption. Only by cutting off the interest chain between the hunted officials and bribes can the soil of corruption be eradicated," he said.

Discipline inspection and supervision organs will improve the precision and effectiveness of the crackdown, investigate bribery and recover illegal gains, while safeguarding the legal operation of enterprises, protecting the rights of people involved and achieving the organic unity of political, disciplinary and social effects, Xiao said.

In September 2021, the CCDI, National Commission of Supervision, CPC Central Committee's Organization Department, United Front Work Department, Commission for Political and Legal Affairs, as well as the top court and top procuratorate, jointly issued a doc-

“Only by cutting off the interest chain between the hunted officials and bribes can the soil of corruption be eradicated.”

Xiao Pei, deputy head of the Communist Party of China Central Commission for Discipline Inspection

ument promoting the crackdown on bribery.

The document listed five key supervision categories — people who give bribes multiple times, bribes of large amounts of money, or offering bribes to a large number of people; Party cadres and employees of government agencies who offer bribes; people who offer bribes in key work sections or major projects; people who offer bribes in the fields of human resources, law enforcement and judiciary, assistance to vulnerable groups and disaster relief, education and health; and people who offer major commercial bribes.

The CCDI and NCS are accelerating the construction of a national

database on those who give bribes and are studying the establishment of a punishment mechanism.

Discipline inspection and supervision organs in many places are exploring the implementation of a "blacklist" system for bribe-givers. Among them, authorities in Zhangjiagang, Jiangsu province, established multiple databases to include pharmaceutical enterprises, suppliers and agents with bad records of commercial bribery.

In December, the top procuratorate issued a guideline on strengthening the handling of bribery cases. Authorities must accurately identify the crime and distinguish whether it was the act of an individual or that of a company or department.

A typical manifestation of commercial bribery is rent-seeking corruption, in which businessmen offer bribes to officials with monopolistic power in order to obtain improper benefits, said Zhuang Deshui, deputy head of Peking University's Clean Government Research Center. Authorities need to punish those involved in bribery in order to reduce the space for corruption in which commercial bribery spreads, he said.

According to statistics released by the top procuratorate, procuratorial organs nationwide prosecuted 8,380 people for taking bribes and 2,563 people for giving bribes in 2022.

US to blame for PLA drills around Taiwan

By ZHANG YI
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The frequent military aircraft exercises by the People's Liberation Army around the island of Taiwan are due to the rising military collusion between the United States and the island administration, a Chinese mainland spokesman said on Wednesday.

"The drills by the PLA sent a stern warning against the escalation of provocations by Taiwan and the US, which damaged peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits," Ma Xiaoguang, a spokesman for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, said on Wednesday at a news briefing in Beijing.

The remarks came after some recent provocative moves by the Democratic Progressive Party authorities in Taiwan, including military purchases from the US, the extension of compulsory military service to one year, and the promotion of kindergartens to teach how to distinguish the sound of artillery shells.

"Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter of the Chinese people, which allows no interference from others," Ma said, adding, "Any attempt to separate Taiwan from China is doomed to fail."

He also condemned a think tank in the US for exaggerating the "China threat theory" to make profits for military groups in the country, through a war game simulation of the "invasion" of the Taiwan island by the mainland.

The simulation by the Center for Strategic and International Studies predicted that if the PLA "invaded" Taiwan in 2026, it could result in heavy losses for parties likely to be involved, including the mainland, the US, Taiwan and Japan.

Ma said that some US think tanks have issued frequent reports on the Taiwan question and the situation across the Taiwan Straits under the guise of academic research.

By hyping up the "threat" from China, they help military industry groups in the US make profits and get more allies to join their attempt of containing the mainland with Taiwan, he said.

They also tried to create divisions between compatriots from the two sides of the Straits, he added.

Regarding such reports, Ma said the compatriots in Taiwan can make their own judgments and will not be misled.

Song Tao, head of the Taiwan Affairs Office, said Taiwan's young people should resolutely oppose separatism and efforts to achieve "Taiwan independence".

Song made the remarks on Tuesday while visiting 31 young people from Taiwan who are working or studying in Beijing.

He noted that they should recognize the serious harm such efforts could cause as well as the sinister intentions of foreign forces that are colluding with them.

Song said that youth on both sides of the Straits are critical in efforts to develop cross-Straits relations, promote the peaceful reunification of the motherland and rejuvenate the nation.

Compatriots on both sides of the Straits are eager to accelerate the resumption of personnel exchanges and promote cooperation, Song said.

He invited more Taiwan compatriots to visit the mainland and make joint efforts to develop cross-Straits relations.

"As long as family members visit each other more often, they get closer," he added.

Feeling great



South China tiger twins play at a breeding base in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, on Wednesday. The cubs celebrated their 100th day after being born and were in good health. HANG XINGWEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Cold front, snow to end unusual winter warmth

By LI HONGYANG
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The National Meteorological Center has forecast that from Wednesday through Sunday, strong cold air will hit most parts of China and keep chilling the nation for the rest of January.

The weather process will bring about heavy snow, rain, fog and sandstorms, and will affect transportation, energy supply and public health, the center said.

The cooling process is not likely to result in consistent freezing weather as it did in 2008, the center said.

The good news is that the cold air will drive airborne pollutants away, the center said. In early January, temperatures in central and eastern China rose by 2 to 4 C more than in normal years, which was linked to an increase in smoggy weather.

Starting from Wednesday to Thursday, Northwest China will cool by as much as 20 C. Sandy and dusty weather is expected to sweep the region, part of which will experience sandstorms.

Till Saturday, the cold air will continue to move to the east and south, bringing about temperature drops of up to 20 C.

Heavy snowfall and even blizzards will hit many parts of China, including the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, Hebei and Hubei provinces and Chongqing municipality. The precipitation is forecast to add snow cover of 5 to 8 centimeters in some areas.

On Tuesday, Hubei Emergency Management Department warned residents about carbon monoxide poisoning risks as doors and windows are often closed during extreme cold.

On Wednesday, the Jiangxi meteorological service said people need to be wary of icy roads on their way home, especially during the peak Spring Festival travel rush for the next 10 days.

At night from Wednesday through Saturday, heavy fog in Sichuan, Jiangsu, Zhejiang provinces and Hainan Island, will lower visibility to less than 200 meters, the center said.

Corrupt official done in by gambling debts

By JIANG CHENGLONG
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A corrupt official with a gambling addiction once sold a house he'd taken previously as a bribe to pay off his gambling debts, according to a TV documentary aired on Tuesday night.

Gan Rongkun, former political and legal affairs chief of Henan province, accepted bribes totaling over 166 million yuan (\$24.5 million) and exploited his power to interfere in many judicial cases, according to the documentary.

Gan used to be the secretary of the political and legal affairs commissions of the provincial Party committees in both Henan and Heilongjiang. He had long worked in the country's customs authorities and also served as vice-governor of Hubei province.

Last month, Gan pleaded guilty to his charges in a court in Jiangsu province.

Gan became obsessed with gambling when serving as a customs official in charge of infrastructure engineering, and usually drank and gambled with businesspeople in the construction industry who would arrange gambling parties and offer to bankroll him, according to the broadcast.

He also gambled online in overseas casinos and accumulated huge debts. Apart from asking businesspeople to repay his debts, he even resorted to selling a house that he acquired through bribery to repay his debts.

When he went abroad on business, he secretly visited local casinos. If he lost, the businesspeople paid the bill, and if he won, he took the money. The total amount of money involved was in the tens of millions of yuan.

Gan offered assistance to businesspeople, including in handling cases, project contracts and business operations, during his tenure

in Hubei, Heilongjiang and Henan provinces.

When taking charge of the political and legal affairs commissions in Heilongjiang and Henan provinces, he sought personal benefit by interfering in judicial cases and making power-for-money deals with businesspeople under the guise of normal work procedures, according to the documentary.

He mostly interfered in civil cases, which in his eyes were not as sensitive as criminal cases. However, Gan was willing to take the risk of interfering in criminal cases if the price was right.

In a dramatic deal, a businessman surnamed Liu offered to send Gan a 10-million-yuan bribe, even without making any requests. Later, when Gan boarded a train from Beijing to Henan, to his surprise he found Liu waiting for him in the carriage.

Liu told him his nephew had been detained by public security authorities in Luoyang city and

wanted him to help in his release. Gan was not overly willing to interfere in the case but Liu directly dialed the phone of Lou Huiheng, the political and legal affairs chief in Luoyang, and asked Gan to give instructions to his subordinate over the phone.

"Can you coordinate the case and release the person?" Lou said in the documentary, recalling what Gan said in the phone conversation. The next day, Liu's nephew was released.

According to the documentary, Gan became more and more licentious in utilizing power to interfere in wide-ranging cases beyond civil and criminal fields until he was investigated.

On May 31, 2021, Gan was smoking on the platform at Beijing West Railway Station and waiting for the departure of the train headed to Henan when officials of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection notified him he was being placed under investigation.

CHINA

Emergency care

Medical workers talk with relatives about patients' conditions at the emergency department of a major hospital in Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui autonomous region, on Tuesday. The hospital has added more staff to work night-long to handle the pressure of the epidemic.

YANG DI / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



Talks on domestic production of Paxlovid ongoing

By WANG XIAOYU and ZHANG ZHIHAO

Authorities are in talks with United States drugmaker Pfizer to facilitate domestic manufacturing of Paxlovid, a COVID-19 treatment, to help meet demand in China, a medical expert said on Wednesday.

Wang Guiqiang, head of the infectious disease department at Peking University's First Hospital, said that the latest COVID-19 control protocol includes five antiviral medications for the disease.

Among them, oral pills are in high demand as China is promoting the use of such drugs during the early stage of an infection to reduce the number of severe cases. Pfizer said on Wednesday that the company and Huahai Pharmaceutical in China are actively promoting the Paxlovid localization project to ensure the supply of the medicine in the Chinese market.

Wang confirmed that the talks are ongoing when asked about the subject at an event organized by the China Public Diplomacy Association. In addition to Paxlovid, Wang said, the domestically developed Azvudine treatment has already been used. Molnupiravir, a COVID-19 drug developed by US pharmaceutical company Merck that gained market approval in China on Dec 30, is not yet in use.

Separately, the fact that Paxlovid is not included on the reimbursement list covered by the national insurance system would not affect China's supply of treatments against COVID-19, an official said on Wednesday.

Huang Xinyu, an official with the National Healthcare Security Administration, said while it is a pity that Paxlovid didn't make it onto the reimbursement list, it would still be temporarily covered by national medical insurance until March 31.

The list also included over 600 types of medicine for cold and fever, meaning that patients would still have a wide variety of alternatives to choose from, Huang said.

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Class B downgrade brings back a sense of normality

Life returns to pre-pandemic activity in many places as restrictions lifted

By WANG XIAOYU wangxiaoyu@chinadaily.com.cn

The first week following China's downgraded management of the novel coronavirus infection on Sunday has seen an orderly and joyous return to normality across the country.

Cui Haoyuan, a 29-year-old in Beijing, said he felt like "reclaiming a sense of control over his life."

As a white-collar worker commuting daily across the city and frequently visiting tennis courts for practice and hanging out at various restaurants, he said that he is most happy with the scrapping of regular nucleic acid tests and the mandatory scanning of digital codes for entry into public spaces.

"Sometimes, I had forgotten to take a test or test results were not shown on my mobile phone on time, which would mess up my workout routines or time with friends," he said. "Now, such concerns have evaporated and it feels great to regain control of my life."

With the virus' management being lowered from Class A to Class B, local governments have stopped rolling out mass testing. However, elderly care and social welfare homes, as well as other facilities with vulnerable people, should continue to take nucleic acid or antigen tests, and visitors should present negative testing results.

"Neighborhoods are also asked to keep some testing booths to meet individuals' demands, and drug-

stores and online retailers should stock up on sufficient antigen tests," Chang Zhao, a researcher from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said during a recent news briefing.

The downgrade also means that local authorities have stopped isolating infected cases, tracking down close contacts and locking down affected areas.

These curbs had previously deterred Gan Liqing, a globe-trotting birder based in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, from traveling.

"There were so many uncertainties and possible hassles associated with a long-distance trip. What if I went out and was quarantined? What if my residential complex was locked down when I came back?"

On Monday, he made his first flight in nearly a year for a jaunt to observe a rare bird species reportedly seen in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province.

"The whole procedure — from boarding to landing at Wenzhou and taking a ferry to the island — was extremely smooth," he said. "It was an amazing feeling to be able to travel around freely."

However, he also noted that he is cognizant of the virus' threats to the elderly and would abide by personal protective measures.

"My parents who are in their 80s have not contracted the virus yet, so to this day we still avoid eating together," he said. "The virus is mutating and the risk of second infections

is very real. I will try my best to avoid getting infected again while restoring my normal life as much as possible."

According to a raft of measures announced along with the downgrade, ramped-up efforts will be dedicated to building intensive care beds, surveying the health conditions of the elderly and other vulnerable groups and strengthening medical capacity in rural areas.

Liang Wannian, head of the National Health Commission's COVID-19 response expert panel, said that the key to virus control work at present is devoting resources to susceptible groups and key facilities, especially related to the elderly.

Despite the country's increasing preparedness for a surge in infections following eased curbs, Liang said pressure on hospital systems appears inevitable. He said triaged treatment protocols and prompt detection of at-risk groups can help relieve strain on hospitals and reduce severe cases and deaths.

Yang Fanchun, manager of an inn in Lijiang, a famed tourist city in Yunnan province, said that he finally felt ready to break ground on a new hotel in the neighboring city of Shangri-La.

"I had shelved the idea for a few years, especially after the virus broke out because of so many uncertainties, such as potential disruption caused by blocked roads or sealed-off scenic spots and unpredictable tourism demands," he said.

"But now, it feels like all the clouds have cleared and so I finally made up my mind to dedicate time and money to the project."



Breathe easy

A family doctor guides a COVID-19 patient to lie prone to breathe better at the patient's home in Deqing, Zhejiang province, on Tuesday. Nearly 700 family doctors in the county are making regular house calls to offer medical services.

NI LIFANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Preparedness ramped up at key locations for holiday

By LI LEI lilei@chinadaily.com.cn

Authorities are ramping up COVID-19 response preparedness in key institutions and services ranging from nursing homes and logistics companies to rural clinics as Spring Festival approaches.

The State Council's Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism, the country's COVID-19 control task force, recently issued a guideline on COVID-19 control at nursing homes and other care facilities.

While elaborating on the document at a news conference on Wednesday, Li Banghua, who oversees elderly care services at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, said the rules were made in line with China's decision to downgrade COVID-19 management from Sunday.

He said local authorities can temporarily close such facilities to non-essential visitors if outbreaks worsen, but the control measures need to be constantly adjusted based on realities such as medical resources.

"In general, it is hoped that nursing homes will be able to avoid large numbers of infections when local infections peak," he said.

Green channels must be established for nursing home residents to be transferred to health facilities if they develop severe conditions, he added.

As large numbers of migrant workers are expected to return to their rural hometowns, Li said his administration is working to create partnerships among nursing homes and rural clinics, township hospitals and higher-level medical facilities.

Bian Zuodong, deputy director

of the State Post Bureau's market regulation department, said courier companies and postal services have handled a large number of deliveries in recent months, as people rushed online to buy protective gear such as N95 masks, antigen test kits and medications.

He said his administration has asked courier companies to mark packages containing medical supplies so that they can be prioritized amid the surge of orders. Local post authorities have been asked to fast-track the handling of complaints involving COVID-19-related goods.

"If medical supplies are lost or destroyed in transit, we encourage companies to reimburse or replace the supplies at their destination," he said.

Li Jian, an official overseeing the Ministry of Civil Affairs' social governance division, said the priority for neighborhood authorities is to ensure older residents and children stay safe.

To that end, community workers have established connections with the relevant groups and their families on social media. A door-to-door campaign has also reached out to those without access to the internet.

"Health services for such groups will mainly focus on three aspects — medical treatment, medication and vaccination," she said.

Neighborhood workers will offer assistance to people needing medical advice, medicines and transfers to hospitals, and guide vulnerable groups to get vaccinated. "Shared medicine boxes" are also being used so that neighbors can pool medical resources in times of need.

Special teams pitch in to fight virus in Zhejiang

By MA ZHENHUAN in Hangzhou mazhenhuan@chinadaily.com.cn

8.77 million

health kits had been distributed to rural residents in Zhejiang province by Jan 3.

Zhejiang province has organized thousands of special teams to distribute daily necessities and medical supplies to residents in rural areas to fight against the recent surge in COVID-19 infections.

More than 10,000 teams were assembled, Li Qiang, an official of the organization department of the Zhejiang provincial Party committee, said during a news conference recently.

The teams include more than 300,000 social workers, Party members and community cadres, delivery workers, volunteers and others.

In addition to helping with groceries and sending medical supplies to children, people with underlying diseases, people with limited mobility and those who receive home-based treatment in rural areas of Zhejiang, the teams also offer other services to residents — especially seniors — including home care and companionship, Li said.

Li said Zhejiang will pay special attention to children, the elderly and people with underlying diseases during the upcoming Spring Festival and will seek to guarantee the supply of daily necessities and meet people's needs for medication and medical treatment.

So far, more than 80,000 villages and communities in the province have set up special teams to cover their geographical grids. Members of the teams are assigned to help deal with problems the residents face in each grid.

"The teams have helped relieve our worries," said Fang Huaifen, secretary of the Lucheng community committee in Linhai city's Gucheng subdistrict, where 228 teams have been dispatched to deliver meals and medicines to the elderly, help them purchase daily necessities and provide various care services.

With a permanent population of 25,000, the community has more than 5,000 people over the age of 60, many of whom live alone, are incapacitated or have severe diseases, according to Fang.

In the city's mountainous Youxi township, where the lack of medical resources is more acute, 23 teams have been sent to assess the needs of residents for medications and other services. They have provided one-on-one and door-to-

door delivery services for vulnerable groups, especially poor households, the elderly who live alone, children and the disabled.

Apart from delivery and care services, these special teams have also been regularly briefing rural residents on the latest developments and information on COVID-19, explaining to them the appropriate protective measures and ways to fight infection.

Residents are encouraged to take the initiative to share medicines and help each other.

Across Zhejiang, the special teams have been actively performing their tasks in cities such as Hangzhou, Ningbo, Shaoxing and Wenzhou.

In Linping district in Hangzhou, a health service specialist has been arranged for each team, who can offer professional medical advice to residents on the go.

In cooperation with a nearby hospital, the teams in the village of Tongjia in Ningbo have established a three-tier health monitoring mechanism for all of its 320 senior villagers, recording their health conditions every day and responding accordingly.

Over the past two weeks, authorities in the province have been dispensing kits containing fever medicine, sanitizers and masks free of charge to residents over the age of 60, with a particular focus on rural areas.

Statistics from the Zhejiang Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs show that 8.77 million kits had been handed out to the province's rural residents by Jan 3, with some 245,000 seniors who live alone, and over 30,000 left-behind children under 14 reached via one-on-one contact.

Zhejiang has passed the first COVID-19 infection peak smoothly, provincial authorities said on Monday. To mitigate health risks, the province has stepped up efforts to improve its capacity to provide pre-emergency hospitalization services for COVID-19 patients.

Fang Xiaojing contributed to this story.

Too early for accurate COVID-19 death tally, experts say

By WANG XIAOYU

Senior Chinese health officials said on Wednesday that as the nation is devoting all-out efforts to boost the protection and treatment of vulnerable groups, it is too early to provide an accurate tally of COVID-19 infections and deaths amid the epidemic.

They made the remarks at an event organized by the China Public Diplomacy Association aimed at promoting communication among health experts and foreign media outlets based in China.

They also said the nation is closely monitoring viral mutations and the

spread of the XBB variant, and that the chance of XBB replacing the current dominant strains of Omicron BA.5.2 and BF.7 in the short term is very small.

Liang Wannian, deputy dean of Tsinghua University's Vanke School of Public Health and a senior expert at the National Health Commission, said there is no universally acknowledged criteria for counting COVID-19 deaths, with some countries relying on the assessments of front-line doctors and some counting all patients who died within 28 days of returning a positive result.

"This method (counting all deaths within 28 days of a positive test) is rela-

tively convenient but the caveat is that this approach is too general," he said.

As a result, he said different countries are now adopting different COVID-19 death criteria and some are also adjusting their standards in accordance with the latest developments of the pandemic.

Liang said that as the COVID-19 pandemic persists, it is impossible to precisely calculate the death rate of the disease. "Only when a pandemic is pronounced over can we provide a clear answer to the question," he said.

Wang Guiqiang, head of the infectious disease department at Peking University First Hospital, said that

since the initial outbreak hit Wuhan, China has been adhering to the criteria of counting COVID-19 deaths as cases who have died of respiratory failure induced by COVID-19 infection.

He said that estimating excess deaths during a period, such as comparing the total deaths reported in Beijing in December from all cases, with the number of deaths registered last December, can be a good indicator of the harm of the disease.

Experts from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention said during an earlier interview that the China CDC is using the measure of excess mortality to record deaths.

WORLD

Prospects for Mideast peace dealt setback

Turns for the worse can be prevented if Israel 'plays its cards well', analysts say

By JAN YUMUL in Hong Kong
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With Israel's far-right coalition government in place, prospects for peace between Palestinians and Israelis are looking even shakier this year, while efforts to broaden Arab-Israeli normalization on the diplomatic front could be strained.

But any turns for the worse can be prevented, and tensions reduced, if Israel "plays its cards well", according to analysts.

On Tuesday, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, held a meeting "condemning in the strongest terms" the Jan 3 visit of a senior Israeli official to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem.

Just days after Benjamin Netanyahu was sworn into his sixth term as Israel's prime minister on Dec 29, the visit of Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir to the compound of the mosque in East Jerusalem sparked widespread condemnation within Arab communities and farther afield.

In its communique, the OIC urged the United Nations Security Council to assume its responsibilities and "act urgently to take the necessary measures, without selectivity or double standards".

It also called for the imposition of "sanctions on the Israeli minister who assaulted the sanctity of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque".

The organization appealed to clergy, authorities and religious institutions globally "to adopt a position calling for an end to these violations and to affirm that preserving the existing historical and legal status preserves the special religious and historical status of the city of Al-Quds".

The United Arab Emirates, with which Israel normalized ties through the United States-brokered Abraham Accords in September 2020, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Türkiye have issued statements denouncing the move. Netanyahu, who was supposed to visit the UAE on Sunday, was forced to postpone his trip to February over the furor, Israeli media reported.

The Israeli Prime Minister's Office issued a statement saying Netanyahu is "committed to strictly maintaining the status quo, without changes, on the Temple Mount" and said the claim that a change has

been made in the status quo "is without foundation".

Ayman Yousef, a professor of international relations at the Arab American University in Jenin in the West Bank, told China Daily that the visit by Ben-Gvir to Al-Aqsa "came as a kind of incursion and infiltration".

"I think Netanyahu's attempt at this stage is to contain the ideological aspirations and ideological component of Ben-Gvir and he is going to rationalize with him," said Yousef.

'Serious violations'

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said on Jan 7 that the Palestinians will confront "the serious violations committed by the new Israeli government and extremist settler groups", Xinhua News Agency reported.

In a long-standing status quo, the Al-Aqsa compound only allows Muslim worship at the site as it is Islam's third-holiest after Mecca and Medina. The site is also called Temple Mount by the Jews, the holiest site in Judaism.

Muslim Imran, director at Malaysia-based think tank the Asia Middle East Center for Research and Dialogue, told China Daily that Netanyahu's return will further polarize Israeli society, especially with a government that is composed of "ultranationalist and ultrareligious groups".

This could mean more tensions, which are likely to have an impact on the Palestinians and regional affairs, he said.

"But the more clear repercussion or impact of Netanyahu's return will be on regional politics. I do believe that Netanyahu, being the main initiator of the recent normalization campaign, with the backing of course of former US president Donald Trump, will try to bring back the normalization agenda to the table," said Imran.

He cited Netanyahu's efforts to reach out to Arab countries and the preparation for the upcoming Negev Forum in Morocco in the spring.

"I believe that Netanyahu might have logic as well as rational wisdom to convince his fellow ministers to be aligned with broader political outlines because Netanyahu might try to normalize further with Muslim countries," said Yousef from the West Bank.

"I think Israel, if they play their political cards well, will have more normal relations with many Arab countries," said Yousef.

Austrian voters drift to right ahead of election

By EARLE GALE in London
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Voters in Austria have drifted further to the right in the run-up to an important regional election, according to pollsters.

Surveys from last November suggested the far-right Freedom Party is the nation's most popular party and it now enjoys support from around 28 percent of the electorate — a rise of 11 percent from where it stood in the middle of 2020.

Experts said the party's growing popularity is down to its populist anti-immigrant stance, its past opposition to strict coronavirus rules, and fears among voters about fast-rising inflation and the country's cost of living crisis.

Austrian political analyst Thomas Hofer told the Financial Times that the party, which is also known as the FPÖ, has a core message of "us down here versus him up there" and that "they have a huge amount going in their favor" following years in the political doldrums.

The latest polls show more mainstream parties are struggling to keep up with the FPÖ, with the Social Democrats now getting support from 25 percent of voters and the center-right Austrian People's

Party, or ÖVP, garnering 21 percent backing. The Greens are currently being supported by 10 percent of the electorate.

The FPÖ claims that citizens of the European Union member state fear the country has lost control of its borders, and the situation caused the ÖVP-led coalition government to block the aspirations of Bulgaria and Romania last month to join the Schengen zone.

Pollsters believe the FPÖ's growing support could result in the party replacing the ÖVP at the helm of the state government of Lower Austria when regional elections are held this month. They also said the party looks to be on course to replace the ÖVP at the head of the national government when the next general election is held, which must happen before the end of 2024.

Chancellor Karl Nehammer and his ÖVP-led government decamped to the town of Mauerbach, to the west of the capital Vienna, on Tuesday to try to address the growing threat from the far-right.

Broadcaster Deutsche Welle said he has a difficult task, with his nation wrestling with a heavy reliance on Russian natural gas, which shot up in price recently as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Holding on



A young rider gets his camel moving in the annual Wadi Zalaga race in Egypt's South Sinai region. The competition is limited to children aged 9 or younger to lighten the load for the camels.

NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Pakistan hails China's efforts against virus

By XU WEIWEI in Hong Kong
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China's battle against COVID-19 has truly been the people's fight, with the country overcoming the challenges due to the whole-government and whole-of-nation approach, said Pakistan's Ambassador to China Moin ul Haque, adding that the Chinese resolve and solidarity in the pandemic fight have been admirable and offered lessons for the world.

"I must say that I'm so impressed (with) the way the entire Chinese nation (had) come forward under the guidance of the central government to fight the pandemic, which has been a challenge not only for China, but also for all the global humanity," Haque told China Daily in Hong Kong.

The diplomat said he has been in Beijing for the last 2.5 years and he has seen firsthand the Chinese government's policies to combat and control the pandemic. Haque visited Wuhan and met some of the heroes who were on the front line in the battle during the pandemic.



Moin ul Haque

China had a decisive victory against COVID-19, Haque said. "China is ... a large country of 1.4 billion people. They need(ed) to have certain policies that

could ensure the safety of the people, so the country made a national effort to save lives," he said. Haque said the recent adjustment in virus control measures announced by the Chinese government is based on logic, reasoning and scientific analysis.

Exchanges continue

The envoy said even during the pandemic, exchanges between Pakistan and China kept on going. The two sides saw trips by delegations, and work on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor continued.

Now, as China has opened its borders again, there will be more exchanges and more flights from Hong Kong to the Chinese mainland, and to Pakistan and other

parts of the world, he said, alluding to Hong Kong's role as a key transit hub.

"And we are looking forward to this renewed exchange. I think it is also going to be a great help to stabilize the global economy," he said.

The diplomat also expressed gratitude to the Chinese government and the Chinese people for helping Pakistan during the difficult time of the pandemic. More than 60 relief flights were sent from China to Pakistan, carrying essential medicines and equipment.

Haque mentioned that Chinese vaccines have been the mainstay in Pakistan's COVID-19 inoculation campaign. "They helped us save lives in Pakistan, they helped save lives across the globe," Haque said.

"So we are really grateful to China (for) playing a very leading role in the effort against COVID-19."

China was the main supplier of vaccines not only to Pakistan, but also to the entire globe, Haque said, noting President Xi Jinping's pledge that whenever any vaccine is developed in China, it would be a public good.

Anger over US subsidies spreads to Belgium

By JULIAN SHEA in London
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Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo has become the latest person to cry foul over the US government's Inflation Reduction Act, a \$430 billion support program for US industries that was passed last August and which Europe fears will lure companies away from its shores.

Subsidies provided under the IRA are to encourage US companies to make the transition to more environmentally-friendly processes and greener energy, but Europe claims they would make rival businesses less competitive.

Speaking to members of his centrist Renew group, De Croo accused the United States of aggressive tactics and ignoring their impact on supposed friendly nations.

"The US, our partner ... they call our industry. And they tell them, 'why are you investing in Europe? You should come over to the US'. Calling German firms and Belgian firms in a very aggressive way — don't invest in Europe, we have something better," he said.

De Croo claimed that chemical and steel companies in Belgium had already been approached to take their business across the Atlantic. The Financial Times quoted an unnamed European Union official as saying that similar reports had come from other leaders, which were judged to be part of a concerted effort. "I think they were very well aware of the impact that it could have," De Croo added.

Calling for coordination

On his state visit to Washington in December, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that "the choices of the past few months, in particular the IRA, are choices that will fragment the West ... we need to coordinate and re-synchronize our policy agendas".

Italian Economy Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti has called for a concerted EU response to the policy, which he claimed could pose a threat to his country's economy.

"Some Italian companies are considering moving production to the US following the IRA scheme, it would be a disaster," he said.

Business leaders as well as politicians have expressed concern about Washington's tactics.

"The IRA forces European companies to relocate manufacturing into the US to participate in US-based projects that weaken European industrial capacities," Yvonne Bendinger-Rothschild, executive director of the European American Chamber of Commerce, told CNN Business. She also said that although it may have proved popular with the domestic audience, "such a policy isn't how you treat friends".

Looking to the EU, De Croo said "our unity is our strength". He also accused Washington of trying to bully the Netherlands into banning the export of chipmaking equipment to China.



In safe hands

A person is rescued by the Colombian Air Force after a landslide in the Rosas district of southwestern Colombia, in this image released on Tuesday. At least 150 families have been affected by the incident that blocked a main road, authorities said.

COLOMBIAN AIR FORCE / AFP

History recalled as Canadians embrace Lunar New Year

By RENALI in Toronto
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The Chinese Lunar New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, is one of the biggest celebrations of the year for those of Asian heritage in Canada, where millions cheerfully usher in the holiday.

But Nancy Chau, chair of the Tribute to Early Chinese Immigrants Canada Foundation, said that Canadians did not always embrace the Spring Festival, which this year falls on Jan 22.

"It's very important for us to understand what happened because Canada was not always the welcoming country that (it is) today," Chau told China Daily during a recent New Year concert hosted by the Li Delun Music Foundation in Toronto.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Immigration Act

of 1923, known today as the Chinese Exclusion Act. In the legislation, the Canadian government revoked the head tax, a large fee charged to Chinese people entering Canada, replacing it with the act that virtually halted immigration from China.

Now the Chinese-Canadian community is the second-largest ethnic group of Canadians of Asian descent. Canadians of ethnic Chinese origin make up 5.1 percent of Canada's population, or about 1.77 million people, according to the 2016 census.

"I want to take the opportunity of (this) concert to remind everyone to remember the history. I wish to have this piece of history written into Canadian history," Chau said.

Chau's appeal followed the East-Meets-West Concert of Favourite Classics, where Dashan (Mark Rowswell), who has been called "the most famous foreigner in China", recited

the Song of Everlasting Sorrow, a narrative poem of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

The poem written by the Chinese poet Bai Juyi (772-846) was inspired by the love affair between Xuanzong (712-756), the seventh emperor of the dynasty, and his consort Lady Yang.

The concert also kicked off massive celebrations in Toronto for the Year of the Rabbit.

Gala, hanfu show

The Dragon Ball gala is one of the largest Chinese New Year celebrations of its kind in North America. Hosted by the Yee Hong Community Wellness Foundation, it will make its long-awaited return on Lunar New Year's Eve at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre this year as an event free of pandemic restrictions.

"The theme of the gala ...

symbolizes the rebirth of the dragon, emerging from the pandemic, stronger, smarter, and more powerful when leaping forward into the Year of the Rabbit," said Stephen Siu, president of the foundation.

In another event, a hanfu show of Dream of the Red Chamber performed by overseas Chinese students, attracted a diverse audience. "I like Chinese culture because it's so amazing. The beautiful hanfu show let me know more knowledge of Chinese culture and history," Olena from Ukraine told China Daily.

The hanfu show was presented by the Echoes from China Traditional Arts Society, an organization of young people in Toronto who share an interest in traditional Chinese culture.

Ella Shi, director of the society, said: "We wish that more people could have the opportunity to get to know our traditional culture."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in a letter to mark the festival, said the occasion is "a chance to recognize the many contributions that Canadians of Chinese descent continue to make to our country".

WORLDUS

China sales lift Airbus over Boeing

By MAY ZHOU in Houston
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Boeing reported a big jump in airplane orders for 2022, but lags Airbus for the fourth consecutive year, mainly due to a soured US-China relationship that has led Chinese airlines to abandon Boeing and turn to Airbus.

Boeing delivered 479 planes, while Airbus delivered 661 planes in 2022. Boeing netted orders of 774 planes, and Airbus finished ahead with 820 net orders.

In total, the multinational European aircraft maker Airbus led Boeing by 226 planes. In 2021, Boeing delivered 340 planes and gained 479 net orders.

Airbus' win over Chicago-based Boeing was largely due to orders from China. In July 2022, Chinese carriers ordered 292 Airbus single-aisle jets, including 196 of the largest-model A321neos; 82 of the A320neos; and 14 of the smallest-model A319neos.

For example, Xiamen Airlines, previously an all-Boeing carrier, defected to Airbus in 2022 and ordered 40 jets from the A320neo family.

For some years, Chinese carriers were purchasing about one-third of all the single-aisle 737s Boeing built in Renton, Washington. However, Chinese airlines haven't ordered any Boeing planes in the last few years primarily due to the deteriorating bilateral relationship and geopolitical tension between US and China.

Also, unlike most of the rest of the world, China hasn't cleared Boeing's 737 MAX to fly again since it was grounded in March 2019 due to two plane crashes that killed 346 people. Boeing said that it will remarket some of the more than 130 737 MAX jets originally designated for Chinese airlines.

David Calhoun, president and

CEO at Boeing, said last October that Boeing still would like to deliver airplanes to China. But he said "it is really hard for me to find signals that things are going to move in our direction".

Both Boeing and Airbus acknowledged that they have large backlogs on their orders due to the impact of the COVID-19, pandemic ranging from supply chain disruptions to labor shortages. Boeing's official backlog stands at 4,578 planes, and the Airbus order backlog is 7,239.

Meanwhile, China is also on the verge of becoming a competitor to Boeing and Airbus. Early this year, it is expected to commercially fly its own and first domestically made, narrow-body jet C919.

Manufactured by Commercial Aircraft Corp of China (COMAC), the C919 functions as a rival to the Airbus A320neo and Boeing 737 MAX. It had received certification from the Civil Aviation Administration of China last September. The first plane was delivered to its first customer China Eastern Airlines last December.

China Eastern Airlines' C919s will seat 164 passengers in a two-cabin configuration, with eight in business class and 156 in economy. Its maximum range is about 3,450 miles. The airline has trained its first batch of personnel, including nine pilots, 24 cabin crew, and 13 maintenance staff.

Eastern ordered five C919s and expects the delivery to be completed in two years.

Currently, Eastern is conducting a 100-hour flight validation campaign on nine domestic routes from its base at Shanghai to Beijing, Chengdu, Xi'an, Haikou, Qingdao, Wuhan, Nanchang and Jinan. The simulation flight is expected to conclude in mid-February.

The C919 is priced at \$99 million, compared with the Airbus A320neo, which costs \$124 million.



Passengers wait for the resumption of flights at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Illinois, on Wednesday after the Federal Aviation Administration had ordered airlines to pause all domestic departures due to a system outage. JIM VONDRUSKA / REUTERS

US flights grounded after system outage

By BELINDA ROBINSON in New York
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Thousands of flights across the United States were temporarily grounded for hours on Wednesday by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) after its computer system experienced an outage that was later fixed, allowing flights to resume "gradually".

The FAA grounded all domestic flights from 7:20 am Eastern time across the country after its system failed at 8:28 pm on Tuesday. It was the first time the FAA had taken such action since the terror attacks of Sept 11, 2001.

It lifted the ground order by 9 am Wednesday after it fixed the "Notice to Air Missions", or NOTAM system, which sends key safety alerts to pilots about conditions that could affect their flights.

Pilots must consult NOTAM before takeoff for safety information on towers, lights on runways, or events taking place near an airport. The system is different than the air traffic control system that ensures planes maintain a safe distance from each other.

The FAA said in a statement on Twitter: "Normal air traffic operations are resuming gradually across

the US following an overnight outage to the Notice to Air Missions system that provides safety info to flight crews. The ground stop has been lifted. We continue to look into the cause of the initial problem."

But even as normal air traffic operations resumed nationwide, more than 8,600 flights were delayed by the early afternoon, and more than 1,250 flights were canceled, data from FlightAware, a website that tracks delays and cancellations showed.

Airports in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Atlanta saw between 30 and 40 percent of flights delayed.

Internationally, flights to the US still took off from Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport and London's Heathrow Airport. None of the international airlines reported cancellations, but they were severely delayed.

Shabnam Amini, a resident of Dallas, Texas, boarded American Airlines Flight 51 at 10 am at Heathrow Airport. But she and other passengers had to sit on board for almost three hours because of delays from the FAA outage.

A backup NOTAM system started on Tuesday night, but the data was corrupted and unreliable. The system was rebooted the next morning, but it took time to work.

The FAA problem came just weeks after Southwest Airlines was forced to cancel tens of thousands of flights after Christmas, when its own system failed, creating travel chaos for passengers.

The airline is allowing passengers to change flights due to the FAA computer outage. At least 377 flights were canceled.

Southwest said in a statement: "As a result of the FAA's outage, we anticipate some schedule adjustments will be made throughout the day."

United Airlines also warned passengers of ongoing delays. "United has activated a travel waiver for any customers who need to change their plans, including offering refunds for customers who no longer want to travel," it said in a statement.

US President Joe Biden said he had been briefed by Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. A thorough "after-action" investigation is underway.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that there was "no evidence of a cyberattack at this point".

Canada also announced that its NOTAM system went down on Wednesday morning but was later

fixed. Buttigieg told CNN that the FAA had simply acted "to make sure that passengers are safe". He added that "we have to understand how this could have happened in the first place" and said an investigation would uncover if the FAA's system was outdated.

Geoff Freeman, president and CEO of the US Travel Association, wrote on Twitter: "Today's FAA catastrophic system failure is a clear sign that America's transportation network desperately needs significant upgrades."

"Americans deserve an end-to-end travel experience that is seamless and secure. And our nation's economy depends on a best-in-class air travel system."

Democratic Senator Maria Cantwell, chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, said that they plan to investigate the causes behind the outage.

The FAA has had no permanent executive since March because Biden's nominee Phillip Washington, the current CEO of Denver International Airport, has not been through a confirmation hearing.

Agencies contributed to this story.

Wall Street starts layoffs of thousands

By AI HEPING in New York
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Two of Wall Street's biggest financial firms on Wednesday started cutting thousands of jobs, with Goldman Sachs cutting up to 3,200 and BlackRock up to 500.

A sharp downturn in investment banking and struggles in retail banking are behind the cuts at Goldman. It is one of the biggest rounds of layoffs at Goldman since the 2008 global financial crisis. Goldman has also struggled to gain traction in consumer banking despite hefty investments.

The aggressive interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve also have hit the markets and earnings at financial firms.

Goldman had just over 49,000 employees at the end of September. And even after this week's layoffs, Goldman Sachs' head count is expected to be larger than it was before the pandemic.

The cuts at Goldman represent about 6.5 percent of the workforce. Goldman skipped an annual culling of staff in 2020 and 2021. Meanwhile, Goldman reportedly is still moving forward with plans to hire junior bankers and in other areas as needed.

A spokesman for BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, cited "an unprecedented market environment" as the reason for the layoffs. Following the layoffs, which represent about 3 percent of staff, the company said it will still have more employees than it did a year ago.

BlackRock grew its workforce by more than 20 percent over the last three years when it and other Wall Street firms hired aggressively during a market boom.

Chris Kotowski, an analyst with Oppenheimer and Co, said everyone

working on Wall Street gets accustomed to kinds of staff reductions, that it is part of doing business.

"You know, people just don't work out," he told National Public Radio. "Sometimes you expanded into an area that just wasn't fruitful, and sometimes you've just overhired."

Other Wall Street firms are also trimming headcount. Morgan Stanley is cutting about 2 percent of its global workforce, and other investment banks might make cuts in the coming weeks depending on whether revenues are tracking below estimates in February and March.

"If things haven't gotten better in the first quarter, we'll have more changes," said compensation consultant Alan Johnson. "You can't have these expensive people sitting around with nothing to do."

The layoffs come as Wall Street firms prepare to announce bonuses for 2022, but analysts have said for weeks the payouts will be greatly reduced at all levels. Salaries for senior bankers can range from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars, while their bonuses can be double or triple their base.

The layoffs aren't limited to Wall Street.

Dow Jones, a division of News Corp that includes The Wall Street Journal, Barron's and MarketWatch, plans to lay off employees today, according to IAPE, the union representing unionized Dow Jones employees. Dow Jones hasn't announced layoffs.

The layoffs appear to be global, IAPE wrote, but won't include the Journal.

The news industry announced 1,800 job cuts last year, up 20 percent from 1,500 in 2021, according to a January report from Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Biden aides find more classified documents

By HENG WEILI in New York
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Another batch of classified documents has been discovered by aides to US President Joe Biden, according to a published report.

NBC News, citing a person familiar with the matter, said that the documents were found at a different location from other documents that were discovered in November in an office Biden had used during his time with the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, a think tank in Washington. The discovery of those documents was first reported by CBS News on Monday.

The White House did not reply to a request for comment Wednesday, while the Justice Department had no comment, NBC reported.

News about the documents in Biden's possession came a few months after a similar situation related to former president Donald Trump's handling of classified documents. Following a months-long dispute between Trump and the Department of Justice, FBI agents executed a search warrant in August of the former president's home

Mar-a-Lago in Florida to gather any classified documents.

In November, US Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed prosecutor Jack Smith as a special counsel to investigate whether Trump violated federal law when he took classified documents after leaving the White House in early 2021.

To review the discovery of the Biden classified documents, Garland appointed US Attorney John R. Lausch Jr of Chicago, who also served in the Trump administration.

The latest news elicited complaints by Republicans of a double standard in how the Trump and Biden document cases have been handled.

"Attorney General Merrick Garland must appoint a special counsel," US Representative Troy Nehls, a Texas Republican, tweeted in response to the latest report Wednesday.

US Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, wrote on Twitter: "Look how President Trump was treated when it came to so-called 'classified' documents at his home. Now look at how President Biden

is being treated for having classified documents at the Biden Center?"

Jordan also will head a new judiciary panel called the Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, which will aim to investigate whether government agencies have considered politics in their actions.

In a letter to Garland on Wednesday, Senator Josh Hawley, a Missouri Republican, wrote: "Please provide a full explanation of the (Justice) Department's decision not to dispatch FBI agents to search the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement for classified documents dating back to the Obama Administration."

David Axelrod, a former strategist for former president Barack Obama, tweeted an image of a "get out of jail free" card from the board game Monopoly and wrote, "Story is much different but this is the image that flashed before Trump's eyes when [the Biden] docs story broke."

Biden worked with the Penn Biden Center after his second term as vice-president concluded in 2017. The University of Pennsylvania

had leased a suite of offices for the center in February 2018, including one for Biden's personal use when he was in Washington.

On Tuesday, while attending the North American Leaders' Summit in Mexico City, Biden said of the documents found in a locked closet at the Penn Biden Center: "After I was briefed about the discovery, I was surprised to learn that there are any government records that were taken to that office. But I don't know what's in the documents."

Of the November documents, Biden said his lawyers acted promptly by contacting the National Archives.

"They did what they should have done," the president said. "They immediately called the archive ... turned them over to the archives."

On Wednesday, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre was asked several times about the documents.

"At this time, I'm not going beyond what the president said yesterday," she said at a press briefing. "It's an ongoing process. We're going to respect the process."

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

Tech giants look to bolster industrial digitalization

By FAN FEIFEI
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Chinese internet and tech heavyweights are stepping up efforts to invest more in cloud computing and enterprise-oriented business, and leverage cutting-edge digital technologies to bolster industrial upgrade as part of their broader push to promote in-depth integration of the digital and real economies, experts said.

"Our biggest opportunities lie in establishing ourselves in the real economy and bolstering the deep integration of the real and digital economies," said Zhang Yong, chairman and CEO of Alibaba, during financial program *Dialogue* on China Central Television on Saturday. Zhang said he is delighted that the country has high hopes for the platform economy and the Central Economic Work Conference stated that platform companies will be supported to "fully display their capabilities" in bolstering economic growth, job creation and global competition.

Zhang regards it as a vote of confidence, though there is still a long way to go to better shoulder such a responsibility, adding that the company's development goals are highly consistent with those of the country and society, which is Alibaba's biggest source of confidence.

The company is ratcheting up efforts to utilize digital technologies to help small and medium-sized enterprises and accelerate industrial transformation in an effort to better empower the real economy.

The cloud computing sector, which is regarded as a key enabler for industry digitalization, is playing an increasingly important role in Alibaba's overall business landscape. The company's cloud revenue, a main growth driver alongside e-commerce, rose 4 percent year-on-year and 17.37 percent quarter-on-quarter to 20.76 billion yuan (\$3.03 billion) during the July-September period.

Revenue growth from non-internet industries driven by financial services, telecommunication and public services industries, continued to improve, growing 28 percent year-on-year and contributing 58 percent of overall cloud revenue during the period.

Zhang said in December that he has assumed the post of acting president of Alibaba Cloud and also the company's work collaboration tool DingTalk. Meanwhile, Zhang Jianfeng has stepped down as cloud business chief and will henceforth lead Alibaba's science and technology research institute, the Damo Academy.

Cloud infrastructure services expenditure on the Chinese mainland grew 8 percent year-on-year to

\$7.8 billion in the third quarter of 2022, according to market consultancy Canalys. Alibaba Cloud led the cloud infrastructure services market, taking up 36 percent of total spending, followed by Huawei Cloud, Tencent Cloud and Baidu AI Cloud.

Chen Duan, director of the Digital Economy Integration Innovation Development Center at the Central University of Finance and Economics, said Alibaba's cloud business will be a key growth engine and pivot apart from its core e-commerce unit.

More efforts are needed to make full use of tech companies' advantages in big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence to empower the digital transformation of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and drive industrial upgrade, Chen added.

Tencent Holdings Ltd is doubling down on the cloud services and industrial internet sector, in a move to bolster digitalization of manufacturing and improve operational efficiency of enterprises.

Dowson Tong, senior executive vice-president of Tencent and president of Tencent's cloud and smart industries group, said the company will continue driving innovations for enterprises to boost their digital competitiveness. In the third quarter of 2022, Tencent's revenue from fintech and business services grew by 4 percent on a yearly basis to 44.8 billion yuan.

"Going forward, we will continue to invest in the global market for our cloud and software businesses and expand our overseas infrastructure coverage, developing local integration and service partnership networks," Tong said.

Tencent has developed its industrial internet platform WeMake, with an aim to help manufacturing enterprises quickly build data-driven smart factories, and improve the digitalization of enterprises' operations, manufacturing processes and equipment management.

Zhu Keli, founding director of the China Institute of New Economy, said industrial internet platforms have great potential to bolster the integration of digital economy and real economy, and empower enterprises through technology, data, finance, infrastructure and other element resources.

There is an urgent need to promote the digital transformation and upgrade of Chinese enterprises through the industrial internet, which will play a critical role in propelling production, optimizing resource allocation and improving operational efficiency, said Pan Helin, co-director of the Digital Economy and Financial Innovation Research Center at Zhejiang University's International Business School.

Experts stress banks' role in real economy

Hopes of monetary policy easing stir debate on credit, consumer demand

By JIANG XUEQING
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Financial institutions should maintain a positive attitude in bolstering the real economy as China will further ease its monetary policy this year to ensure an uptick in the overall economy, experts said.

Major banks should maintain credit support for the real economy and promote an economic upturn, according to decisions made at a meeting held by China's central bank and the top banking and insurance regulator on Tuesday.

Some credit extension procedures and some credit policies need to be adjusted according to different situations in different cities and regions. The standards and requirements for risk identification should be relaxed at financial institutions, which may have a higher risk appetite, said Lian Ping, chief economist at Zhixin Investment and head of the Zhixin Investment Research Institute.

The People's Bank of China, the central bank, should extend more loans to commercial banks via relending facilities with a focus on major areas of the economy. Such low-cost funds will allow commercial banks to better support the real economy and boost consumer demand, Lian said.

In addition, the PBOC may cut

the reserve requirement ratio once or twice this year by 25 basis points each and lower its market-based benchmark lending rates two or three times by 20 to 40 basis points in all for the whole year, he said.

China's new yuan-denominated loans totaled 1.4 trillion yuan (\$206.74 billion) in December, up by 266.5 billion yuan year-on-year. However, its increment in aggregate social financing — the total amount of financing to the real economy — came in at 1.31 trillion yuan last month, down by 1.05 trillion yuan compared with the same period of previous year, the PBOC said.

The country's new yuan-denominated loans hit 21.31 trillion yuan in 2022, up by 1.36 trillion yuan from 2021. The steady growth in lending has helped stabilize economic fundamentals, experts said.

In 2023, China's new yuan-denominated loans and increment in aggregate social financing are expected to grow more rapidly than in the previous year, said Lou Feipeng, senior economist at Postal Savings Bank of China.

The structural monetary policy will play an important role in guiding the flow of funds. Apart from bolstering the firm demand for housing, China may also launch policies to support the demand for upgraded housing according to market conditions and guide corporate loans to

key areas of the economy, including privately owned small businesses, technological innovation and the manufacturing sector, Lou said.

In the first half of this year, the PBOC is likely to further cut the interest rates of its medium-term lending facility loans, which will lead to the lowering of loan prime rates, market-based benchmark lending rates, especially the five-year LPR, he said.

Zeng Gang, director of the Shanghai Institute for Finance & Development, said boosting domestic demand is a major task for China this year, which requires targeted and strong structural monetary and financial policies to support the private sector, platform enterprises and small businesses, with the aim of creating more jobs and increasing household incomes.

Policies should also be launched to strengthen support for major areas of the real economy, such as the demand for upgraded housing, new energy vehicles, elder care, infrastructure investment, industrial modernization, low-carbon development and rural vitalization, he said.

China International Capital Corp, a joint-venture investment bank, raised its GDP growth forecast for China on Wednesday to about 5.5 percent this year in a base-case scenario from around 5.2 percent expected in November. The World Bank on Tuesday slashed its 2023 projections for global economic growth to 1.7 percent in 2023 from 3 percent expected six months ago.

Specialists agree HK economy has bright future

By OSWALD CHAN
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Hong Kong may face short-term challenges due to the uncertainty shrouding the global economy, but the future looks bright, thanks to the continuing and wide-ranging support of the country and the "one country, two systems" principle, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said.

The chief executive made the remarks on Wednesday at the opening of the two-day 2023 Asian Financial Forum, organized by the HKSAR government and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, with participants from more than 70 countries and regions attending in the form of 20 international delegations.

This year's Asian Financial Forum has invited more than 100 global business leaders, policymakers, financial and wealth management professionals, entrepreneurs, technology innovators and economists to share their insights on international finance and economy, trade, sustainability and other issues. There are more than 2,000 in-person participants, with 3,000 others attending the event online.

Lee cited the International Monetary Fund's data that global economic growth is likely to slow from 3.2 percent last year to 2.7 percent this year, with outlook fraught with uncertainty. That external uncertainty will weigh on Hong Kong this year as the city is a small, open and free economy which relies heavily on external trade and investment.

"Thanks to the continuing and wide-ranging support of our motherland, Hong Kong's strengths as an international financial center linking the mainland and the rest of the world are primed to proliferate," Lee said.

The chief executive also said the city is actively enhancing its strengths as an international financial center, a global offshore renminbi hub and an international asset management and risk management center, under the clear direction of the 14th Five-Year (2021-25) Plan. The city also strives to continue expanding the mutual access between the financial markets of the mainland and Hong Kong.

"Thanks to our 'one country, two systems' principle, Hong Kong is blessed with a wealth of prospects, in financial services, in trade and logistics, in innovation and technology, in arts and culture, and much more. So many good stories to tell. So many opportunities to realize," Lee said.

HKTDC Chairman Peter Lam Kin-ngok told the forum: "We need to revitalize and transform so that we will be better equipped to withstand any crises in the future. Global cooperation has become more important than ever and our collective aim is to stimulate growth."

The forum included a plenary session focusing on how global cooperation can be strengthened to tackle challenges ranging from the COVID aftermath to supply chain crises, from geopolitical conflicts to soaring costs of living.

"By keeping inflation low and stable, we could create an environment that encourages firms and households to do their businesses, promote productive activities and foster innovations," said Zhang Tao, chief representative of the Bank for International Settlements' Representative Office for Asia and the Pacific.

RIGHT TRACK



Coal piles up at Lianyungang Port, Jiangsu province. WANG CHUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

China Energy vows to ensure coal supply

By ZHENG XIN
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China Energy Investment Corp vowed to further ensure the country's energy security by boosting coal supplies this year while stepping up green energy transition.

The company, also known as China Energy, produced 600 million metric tons of coal last year, up 5.4 percent year-on-year. The company's sales of coal also rose 2.6 percent year-on-year to 790 million tons, said Huang Qing, spokesman of the company, on Wednesday.

"Ensuring energy security has always been a primary task for China Energy and the company will further step up energy supplies, with coal serving as the cornerstone and playing a supportive role in maintaining energy security," Huang said.

"We will further strengthen our role in ensuring sufficient energy supply in 2023 and will be continuously stepping up domestic energy supplies and reserve capacity."

Average monthly output of coal produced by the company has been around 50 million tons during the past 15 months, he added.

Luo Zuoxian, head of intelligence and research at the Sinopec Economics and Development Research Institute, said in addition to the rapid development of clean energy, it is necessary for China to make full use of coal as a supportive part of its energy strategy.

"It is also important that we give full play to the utilization of clean coal, as China has been steadily striving to meet its carbon peak and neutrality targets in recent years," he added.

According to China Energy, the company also actively laid out plans in clean energy projects last year, including solar power, wind power, hydrogen, geothermal and biomass.

Chen Jing, head of the International Cooperation Department of the company, said new energy projects with a total installed capacity of 11.8 million kilowatts were put into operation last year, while 25.57 million kW of new energy projects

kicked off construction last year, with both figures hitting record highs.

Renewable energy capacity now accounts for 31 percent of the company's total capacity, up by 2.3 percentage points year-on-year, Chen said.

China's green transition has been gaining momentum in recent years, with total installed capacity for renewable energy generation rising to 1.1 billion kW over the past 10 years, with generation capacities of hydropower, wind, solar and biomass ranking tops in the world, said the National Energy Administration.

The company vowed to continue accelerating the construction of massive wind and solar power facilities in the country's Gobi Desert and other arid regions while stepping up offshore wind and solar projects.

Meanwhile, the company is also stepping up hydropower station construction and pumped storage hydropower projects, while pushing forward the clean utilization of coal, it said.

Briefly

CCECC makes headway in groundbreaking lab

China Civil Engineering Construction Corp, a unit of State-owned China Railway Construction Corp Ltd, announced on Wednesday that it has completed the headquarters building (phase I) of the Africa Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. With a gross floor area of 23,570 square meters, the project consists of administrative offices, an emergency response center, information center and laboratories. The facility will be the first of its kind in Africa fully equipped with modern administrative, experimental and other support facilities.

ChiNext IPOs raise 180b yuan in 2022

Initial public offerings of 150 newly listed companies on ChiNext, China's Nasdaq-style board dominated by growth enterprises, raised 179.64 billion yuan (\$26.57 billion) in 2022, said the Shenzhen Stock Exchange. By Jan 9, the number of listed companies on the ChiNext board reached 1,232, with total market capitalization exceeding 11 trillion yuan. A total of 40 companies went public on Shenzhen's main board last year, raising 31.88 billion yuan.

XINHUA - CHINA DAILY

BUSINESS

Credit services urged to support economy 'early on'

Major lenders chart faster steps in key areas and weak links, inject impetus into development

By JIANG XUEQING
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Major banks in China must get the pace of credit extensions right so that their credit policies will produce effects early on, further optimize their credit structures, and provide targeted support for key areas and weak links of national economic and social development, according to decisions made at a meeting held by China's central bank and its top banking and insurance regulator on Tuesday.

Large State-owned commercial banks in the country recently said they will stay focused on serving the real economy and expanding domestic demand this year and accelerate the establishment of a modern industrial system, as well as step up extensions of credit to micro and small enterprises, technological innovation and green development.

Industrial and Commercial Bank of China will expedite the innovation of consumer financial products and services to make such services more convenient for and accessible to customers.

As China's largest State-owned commercial lender by total assets, ICBC will increase the supply of money to the manufacturing sector, strategic emerging industries and the digital economy, proactively promote rural vitalization and the development of the energy and resources sectors, strengthen synergies by adopting policy-based and developmental financial instruments and continuously enhance financing for domestic investments while focusing on major projects outlined in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25).

China Construction Bank Corp will proactively explore affordable rental housing, urban renewal and funds to finance rental housing, and push for a steady transition of the real estate sector toward new development models.

At a meeting studying guiding principles of the annual Central Economic Work Conference, CCB said it will deepen supply-side structural reforms and strongly support the advanced manufacturing sector, low-carbon industries, construction of new types of infrastructure, the establishment of a new type of energy system, and the transformation and upgrading of traditional industries.

Bank of China will ramp up credit in key areas to support high-quality development of the real economy, support the upgrading of traditional industries and fostering of strategic emerging industries, help accelerate the construction of a modern industrial system and exploit its advantages of globalized operations to help better attract foreign investment.

BOC will boost consumer confidence by offering high-quality financial products and services to promote the expansion of domestic demand, meet reasonable financing demand and effectively prevent and miti-

gate risks associated with leading real estate developers.

Agricultural Bank of China insists on putting rural vitalization in a more prominent position, strengthening support for rural industries and rural construction, as well as consolidating and expanding the achievements in poverty alleviation.

Bank of Communications will further accelerate the optimization of its business structure and strategic transformation. In addition, it will ramp up efforts to promote breakthroughs and innovation in retail loans by giving full play to its home-field advantage in Shanghai.

Meanwhile, large State-owned commercial lenders stress that they will prioritize efforts ensuring timely delivery of presold homes, preventing and controlling risks faced by leading property developers and mitigating the risk of local government debts. It will also develop countermeasures for potential risks in key fields and make emergency response plans for risk disposal.

"China's banking sector should pursue consumption and investment with full force this year. The country must innovate products and services to meet reasonable financial demand derived from the consumption of bulk commodities and the rigid and upgraded demand for housing, tap the potential of consumption by seniors and promote better development of new types of consumption," said Lou Feipeng, senior economist at Postal Savings Bank of China.

"The country needs to provide credit support for the construction of major projects and the manufacturing and real estate sectors, as well as allow investment to effectively play a key role in optimizing the structure of supply," Lou said.

Apart from increasing total credit extensions according to the needs of economic development, banks should ramp up credit extensions to green development, technological innovation, privately owned small businesses and rural vitalization, with a focus on key fields and weak links in China's economic development, and promote the transformation and upgrading of the economic structure, he said.

Corporate loans, especially medium- and long-term loans, are expected to increase further as China has cut the reserve requirement ratio for banks and stepped up efforts in key fields such as infrastructure, manufacturing and real estate. The key lies in the implementation of supporting financing via policy-based and developmental financial instruments, said Wen Bin, chief economist at China Minsheng Banking Corp.

The current participation rate of banks in projects supported by policy-based and developmental financial instruments still needs to be boosted. Further efforts should be made to form the physical workload in the following months, Wen said.



Medical experts interact with a patient through an online platform at a hospital in Cangzhou, Hebei province.
FU XINCHUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Digital pathological diagnosis systems optimizing healthcare transformation

By ZHENG YIRAN
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Pathological diagnoses of diseases are embracing more digital tools, with artificial intelligence playing a vital role in helping make more accurate and objective diagnoses.

Pathological diagnosis identifies diseases or conditions by examining cells and tissues under a microscope. Digital pathological diagnosis, or digital pathology, adopts intelligent algorithms to increase efficiency and accuracy, shorten the period of report generation and resolve hospital staff shortages.

According to the 2022 China White Paper on Digital Pathology issued by the Shanghai Digital Medicine Innovation Center and Beijing-based think tank Equal-Ocean, 80 percent of the surveyed pathologists think that digital pathology increases efficiency by 50 percent.

The white paper stated that 40 percent of the surveyed hospitals are building or have built a digital pathology system. Over half of them have spent more than 1 million yuan (\$147,620) on the sector, with some investing more than 5 million yuan.

The system requires an accumulated investment of some 10 million yuan to build a complete digital pathology system and the construction period can be long, experts said.

In 2022, about 23 percent of remote clinical consultations were reported to have used digital pathology, the white paper said.

The nation is undergoing a transformation from traditional pathological diagnosis to digital pathology. For hospitals that have already established a digital pathology system, the application scenario and

“A universal platform to integrate medical big data is needed to boost the optimization of the AI-enabled digital pathology system. Laws and regulations should also be in place to avoid medical malpractice.”

Tang Dajie, guest researcher at Wuhan University

utilization rate has been increasing and the penetration rate of digital pathology is expected to further rise, said the white paper.

Most of the surveyed doctors praised the country's digital pathology system, stating that it greatly enhances the efficiency and accuracy of pathological diagnosis, optimizes the learning curve and shortens training periods, it said.

“With the development of digital technologies, digital pathology will become mainstream in the industry. Products such as digital pathology image browsers and AI-enabled diagnosis-assistance systems are expected to be applied widely,” said Zhang Jing, a medical device expert at VBDData.cn, a Chongqing-based healthcare service platform.

“Seeing opportunity in the blue ocean, several domestic startup companies are tapping into AI-enabled digital pathology products,” Zhang said.

Guangzhou, Guangdong province-based med-tech company DM Intelligence has been focusing on digital pathology for years and is mulling a new round of investment.

The funds are for marketing existing products and clinical experiments of an AI-enabled diagnosis-assistance system for breast cancer.

“Digital pathology is deeply rooted in the country's healthcare system. The digital pathology system has become an indispensable tool for hospitals, third-party test centers, centers for disease control and prevention, and scientific research institutions,” said Fan Yujun, founder of Jinan Danjier, a domestic enterprise of digital pathology.

In 2010, Fan introduced Hungarian company 3DHISTECH Ltd — the world's first self-developed digital pathology brand — to China. The movement greatly broadened domestic pathologists' horizons and stimulated their digital-thinking models.

Between 2013 and 2019, thanks to the development of related telecom solutions, it took less time for medical experts to open images during online consultations. During this period, China's digital pathology sector has seen leaps in development.

“There are more upgrades and transformations in the sector between 2020 and 2025. Intellectualization and full digitalization is becoming the mainstay,” Fan said.

Tang Dajie, guest researcher at Wuhan University, said that the sector still contains much room for improvement.

“A universal platform to integrate medical big data is needed to boost the optimization of the AI-enabled digital pathology system. Laws and regulations should also be in place to avoid medical malpractice,” Tang said.



Photo by Wang Jing

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BUSINESSFOCUS

New energy development powers ahead

Rooftop solar gear, biomass heating, pumped-storage hydroelectricity among tech on rise

By LIU YUKUN and ZHENG XIN

Yang Xiaoping, a villager from Linzi, Shandong province, was pleasantly surprised to earn an extra 5,000 yuan (\$738) or so by selling electricity generated from his rooftop photovoltaic equipment.

Yang installed the equipment some 10 months ago and it has generated a cumulative 14,100 kilowatt-hours. "I didn't know about rooftop PV until a fellow villager recommended it. There's an increasing number of villagers like me who have decided to install PV facilities for some extra money."

Yang is among the many in 676 locations designated as demonstration sites for China's promotion of rooftop solar installations. The program is part of the country's concerted efforts to beef up new energy development to fulfill its green commitment.

Many villagers like Yang are contributing to the country's development of new energy in different ways. Some are utilizing biomass heating through burning pellet fuels made from crops and urban waste instead of coal. Other regions have embraced the installation of wind turbines, encouraging residents to use wind power as a way to promote the use of clean energy.

New energy development is on a fast track as new forms of power generation flourish, accelerating changes in the structure of energy use as part of China's goal to peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality by 2060, experts said.

Power generated from renewable energy is growing steadily. In the first three quarters of 2022, China's renewable energy power generation reached 1.94 trillion kWh, according to the National Energy Administration.

Among power generated from renewable energies, hydropower from stations whose annual revenue surpasses 20 million yuan reached 950.7 billion kWh in the first three quarters of 2022, up 5 percent year-on-year. Wind power totaled 544.1 billion kWh, up 15.9 percent from the previous year. Photovoltaic power generation was 328.6 billion kWh, up 32.2 percent on a yearly basis. Biomass power generation was 112.9 billion kWh, up 0.1 percent year-on-year, according to the NEA.

Authorities said that ensuring new energy generation projects connect to the grid in a timely manner will not only help increase the supply of clean electricity and ensure energy supplies during the winter, but also promote a low-carbon energy transformation as a way to achieve China's green goals.

The nation's installed capacity of wind and solar power accounted for around 50 percent and 30 percent of the world's total in 2021, respectively, according to Lu Xinming, deputy director-general of the department of climate change affairs at China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment.



Technicians install photovoltaic panels at a solar power plant in Zhangye, Gansu province, in December. WANG JIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY



A view of a wind farm in Hami, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, on Jan 1. CAI ZENGLE / FOR CHINA DAILY

and Environment.

Industry statistics show that of the world's top 10 wind turbine manufacturers, seven are Chinese companies. Seventeen of the world's top 20 solar companies are Chinese and six of the world's top 10 lithium battery enterprises are also from China.

The country has also rolled out new policies to improve infrastructure to support new energy development. A plan released in October 2021 by the State Council, the country's Cabinet, called for the country to develop a storage system for new

energy, including new types of power storage and pumped-storage hydroelectricity.

That last type of storage allows energy from intermittent sources, such as solar and wind, or excess electricity from more renewable sources to be stored for periods of higher demand. The energy is stored by using it to lift water that can be used to generate electricity through falling water at hydropower stations when needed.

"To reach carbon neutrality by 2060, wind and solar will eventually

need to account for about 65 percent to 70 percent of the total energy mix. How to transform intermittent wind power and photovoltaics into stable power sources will be a major issue to ensure energy security," said Lin Boqiang, head of the China Institute for Studies in Energy Policy at Xiamen University.

Ren Jingdong, deputy head of the NEA, said promoting integration between fossil fuel energy development and renewable energy development is an inevitable step toward achieving energy

“How to transform intermittent wind power and photovoltaics into stable power sources will be a major issue to ensure energy security.”

Lin Boqiang, head of the China Institute for Studies in Energy Policy at Xiamen University

security and stability.

"In order to ensure energy security," Lin said, "attention should be paid to the stable operation of power grids over the short- to mid-term. In addition, in response to insufficient power supply in certain regions caused by extreme weather, and due to the high reliance on oil imports, efforts should be made toward more power grid construction and optimization, as well as diversification of power sources."

Lin added: "Over the mid- to long-term, to ensure a safe power supply after a large proportion of wind and solar power facilities are connected to the grid, efforts should be made to scale up installations of power storage systems to ensure stable energy supply, and gradually improve electricity's pricing mechanism."

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Ren also said what is needed is a high level of opening-up in the energy sector and exploring new prospects for mutually beneficial energy cooperation.

Wang Lining, director of the oil market department at the Economics and Technology Research Institute under China National Petroleum Corp, said that with the rapid development of new sources of energy, the role of coal in China's energy structure is forecast to continue to change, from being the main source before 2030 to a supporting role between 2030 and 2040, followed by the role of emergency guarantor in case of new energy shortages between 2050 and 2060.

The share of coal in the energy structure is expected to decline to 44.3 percent in 2030 and 5.8 percent in 2060, according to ETRI forecasts. "As the cleanest fossil fuel, natural gas is the main energy source to promote the development of a clean and low-carbon transformation of the energy structure," Wang said.

Before 2040, demand for gas in all sectors is expected to keep growing and to peak at 600 billion cubic meters in 2040, with 55 percent of the increase attributed to the generation of electricity. With the rapid development of new energies, the demand for gas in all sectors is forecast to fall to 370 billion cubic meters in 2060, according to ETRI.

It is forecast that in 2023, total energy consumption will reach the equivalent of 5.5 billion metric tons of standard coal, an increase of about 3 percent, while energy consumption per unit of GDP will continue to decline. Non-fossil energy will account for more than 18 percent. Electricity consumption will increase by 5.5 percent year-on-year, according to the State Grid Energy Research Institute, a subsidiary of the State Grid Corp of China.

In terms of power supply, it is forecast that China will have about 320 million kilowatts of newly installed power generation capacity by the end of 2023, and the total installed capacity will reach 2.96 billion kW by then, an increase of 12.2 percent over the previous year.

There is a high probability that coal's production capacity, output and ability to supply will increase, while coal imports will decrease in 2023. With the increase in the proportion of wind, solar and nuclear power generation, the demand for coal will see slower growth next year, and coal prices will gradually decrease to what is considered a reasonable level, said the institute.

Prices of oil and gas — impacted by the global supply and demand situation and geopolitical conflicts — are expected to remain high and volatile for a certain period, which may lead to a reduction in imports of these resources, it said.

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Chinese oil refiners expect to boost exports

By ZHENG XIN

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Refiners in China are likely to boost exports of refined oil products in the period spanning the last two months of 2022 and into early 2023, which will help stabilize global oil markets and quench the worldwide thirst for gasoline and diesel amid the global energy crisis, analysts said.

The rise in those exports will also support the Chinese economy by boosting exports and tapping excess refining capacity, said Luo Zuoxian, head of intelligence and research at the Sinopec Economics and Development Research Institute.

"China's strong electric vehicle sales in 2022 also pose a challenge to gasoline demand recovery, and exports of refined oil products will also help tackle the excess domestic refining capacity," he said.

The PetroChina Planning & Engineering Institute under the China

National Petroleum Corp has forecast that the greater use of electric vehicles will result in China's gasoline demand peaking in 2026.

China's refining capacity is growing faster than the demand for its products, creating a lot of potential for exports. Stepping up those exports will also ensure the normal operation of domestic refiners, Luo added.

China's refining capacity is expected to have hit 920 million metric tons in 2022, leveling off at 950 million tons in 2030, according to the CNPC Economics & Technology Research Institute.

The country's refining capacity rose to 910 million tons a year in 2021, overtaking the United States and accounting for more than 18 percent of global refining capacity.

Due to the impact of COVID-19, demand for domestic refined oil products has dropped in China, with the transportation sector suffering the most, while the

downstream consumption of the chemical industry continued to grow, according to the CNPC Economics & Technology Research Institute.

It is expected that China's petroleum usage will rise in the second quarter of 2023, when transportation is forecast to make a notable recovery as COVID-19 control policies are further optimized. It may experience a 2 percent growth for the whole year, said the institute's deputy head Jiang Xuefeng during the International Energy Executive Forum jointly held by CNPC and S&P Global Commodity Insights in Beijing in December.

Jiang said that China's 2022 petroleum demand is expected to have dropped 2 percent year-on-year, driven by a 7.3 percent year-on-year decline in oil product consumption, with the COVID-19 pandemic having dampened transportation fuel demand.

According to the institute, the

recovery of demand for refined oil products in China has occurred faster than in the rest of the world, and the rapid development of electric vehicles in the country is accelerating the peak of oil product consumption.

At the same time, China's domestic oil production is expected to have risen for the fourth consecutive year in 2022, a trend that is expected to continue in 2023. The country has also been diversifying its crude oil sources to ensure energy security, it said.

In August, China set the size of its latest group of oil product export quotas in 2022 at about 15 million tons, including 13.25 million tons of gasoline, diesel and aviation fuel, and 1.75 million tons of low-sulfur marine fuel.

Chinese refineries, especially State-owned refiners, were expected to ramp up output by at least 82 percent, and independent refiners by around 60 percent, to utilize 80 percent of the issued quotas by the



A Sinopec employee inspects refinery equipment in Huai'an, Jiangsu province, in August. ZHAO QIRUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

end of the year, according to estimates by China-based Longzhong Consultancy.

China exported around 37.25 million tons of refined fuel in 2022, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

Citi analysts said Chinese month-

ly refined oil product exports might double to 4 million to 5 million tons for the November-December period, and refiners in China are also likely to make the biggest increases in exports of diesel, which has a higher profit margin than gasoline or jet fuel.

COMMENT

Editorials

EU paying the price for buying 'security guarantee' from US

The European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization issued a joint declaration on cooperation on Tuesday. The third such declaration after the first in 2016 and the second in 2018, it is the first to portray China as a challenge. Although reticent in its wording, Beijing has firmly opposed the accusations as unwarranted and evidence of the Cold War mentality embraced by NATO that was enshrined in the transatlantic security alliance's latest Strategic Concept adopted in June.

The guideline for the US-led organization's actions for the next decade, the Strategic Concept had no qualms about falsely portraying China as a challenge to the interests, security and values of the NATO members and makes no secret of the organization's intention to expand into the Asia-Pacific. It does not require any great acumen to identify whose hand has shaped both NATO's concept of security and the EU-NATO joint declaration.

The EU and China are economic and trade partners and shoulder a shared responsibility to address climate change and other global challenges. The EU should be steering well clear of the confrontational clique-building of the United States.

But the EU-NATO declaration serves to show how far the EU has drifted away from its aspirations of seeking common development, upholding strategic independence and promoting multilateral global governance. Washington will be feeling very pleased with itself that the assertion that China is a "challenge" is one of the 14 points put forward in the joint declaration, since it marks an important step forward in

engaging the EU in the US' China containment strategy in the guise of collective security. Taking advantage of the Ukraine crisis, the US is trying to bind NATO's "interests" to those of the EU.

The EU should be vigilant to the fact that not only are its interests of different nature to those of NATO, but it has its own security mechanism. NATO, which is under the sway of Washington, is just trying to blur the lines by docking its Strategic Concept with the EU's Strategic Compass and define that move as "a key juncture for Euro-Atlantic security and stability, more than ever demonstrating the importance of the transatlantic bond".

The EU should ask why its Strategic Compass, a security initiative the Ukraine crisis prompted it to issue last year, lacks funding. What the US pays NATO is more like a ransom, if not bait, for the European countries to surrender their security affairs to it. That means the EU's lack of funds for its own security is primarily caused by NATO being a guzzler of many EU members' defense budgets. NATO is nothing but the misappropriation of the EU's money by the US in pursuit of the latter's geostrategic goals.

The "security guarantee" the EU members are paying for is priced so they surrender their independence to Washington. For that reason, the joint declaration is anything but one on cooperation. Rather it is a declaration of Washington's successful manipulation of the EU and NATO. With the EU wanting to end it and NATO prolonging it, the Ukraine crisis should bring home to the EU what lies in store if it outsources its security to the US via NATO.

Justified response to neighbor's discrimination

At the G20 Summit in November, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida called on China to lift its COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control measures.

Yet on Dec 27, after China adopted provisional measures to step up cross-border travel, Japan introduced discriminatory entry measures targeting arrivals from the Chinese mainland, who must undergo a nucleic acid test upon arrival. Those testing positive will be quarantined for seven days.

The low fatality and severity rates of the Omicron variants are well known, and there is no reason for Japan and other countries such as the United States and the Republic of Korea to target arrivals from the mainland in disregard of science, facts and their own actual epidemic situations.

China has explained to countries that have expressed concerns the scientific basis for the refinement of its COVID-19 response measures and given them a clear appraisal of the current epidemic situation in the country. There is no justification for such discriminatory measures, which as a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry said, are further political manipulation of the pandemic.

The discriminatory nature of the measures has been highlighted by photos posted by Chinese tourists arriving in the ROK and Japan showing they are given colored cards to wear around their neck as they are guided to the nucleic acid test sites.

Which makes it no surprise that China, acting on the principle of reciprocity, has suspended the issuing of short-term visas to citizens of Japan and the ROK, with the new adjustment taking effect on Tuesday.

The political motivation behind the moves of Japan and the ROK is made evident by the welcome extended to Chinese tourists by other countries. When Xiamen Airlines flight MF833 carrying 269 Chinese tourists landed in the Thai capital on Monday, a large group of greeters led by Anutin Charnvirakul, the deputy prime minister and minister of public health, and other officials welcomed the tourists at the airport.

On Tuesday, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control jointly provided guidelines for flights from China, which include requiring tourists to provide test results, advising both tourists and airline staff to wear face masks and strengthening the cleaning and sanitizing work of the plane cabins. Those are more reasonable measures than the invidious ones adopted by Japan and the ROK.

It is the job of any government to protect its citizens, but those discriminating against arrivals from the mainland are using that pretext as an excuse to further smear China's response to the pandemic, which has been more effective than their own. Any attempts at political manipulation are futile given what China's response to the pandemic has accomplished.

Washington's warmongering knows no bounds

The top US Marine Corps general in Japan has said that the US is "setting the theater" in the Asia-Pacific region the same way it did in Ukraine after 2014.

Putting that military-speak into ordinary words: the United States is preparing to initiate a future conflict in the region in the same way it did in Ukraine following the US-backed ousting of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich.

Claiming that Ukraine had made big achievements in its conflict with Russia thanks to the preparations that the US made for the hostilities — by "training the Ukrainians, prepositioning supplies, identification of sites from which we could operate support, sustain operations" — Lieutenant general James Bierman, commander of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force and of Marine Forces Japan, said that the US is now doing the same "in Japan, in the Philippines, in other locations".

Under the backdrop of the US' rising enmity toward China and its constant provocations over the Taiwan question, what Bierman said makes it clear that the Pentagon now harbors the intention to fan the flames of war in the region.

Nevertheless, while the US intends to make Taiwan the fuse for conflict, it will still be a mistake to believe that the US is ready to sacrifice US lives for the island. As it has done with Ukraine, it will seek to use proxies to do its dirty work. Thus its so-called war preparations involve pushing its regional

allies to the forefront in its next theater of war. Although in the case of Japan, it appears to need no pushing as it has enthusiastically jumped on the US' militarized bandwagon.

Japan's eagerness to contain China is because that offers it an excuse to remilitarize. This in the eyes of its right-wing politicians is the only way it can gain status and recognition on the world stage as a normal country.

The new security strategy drawn up by the Fumio Kishida government names China "the biggest strategic challenge" and includes language that can justify military action, breaking the constraints of Japan's post-World War II Constitution. With Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visiting Washington next week, it can be anticipated that Japan will step forward to help the US "set its theater".

But the warmongering collusion between the US and Japan will not daunt China. Beijing has repeatedly warned outside forces that they court disaster by trying to exploit the Taiwan question to contain China. The People's Liberation Army has made it clear with its recent drills around the island that it will take action to resolutely smash any act that aims to split Taiwan from the motherland.

The US' allies should take an objective look at what has happened to Ukraine since the US set it up as a theater of war, and consider what might entail if they enable Washington to set a theater of war in the region with them as its proxies.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

Recuperation space for firms boon for economic recovery

In a recent interview, Beijing's acting mayor Yin Yong said the government should increase support for enterprises and give them space to recuperate so that they can see further development.

It is necessary for the authorities to implement some policies to reduce the burden on enterprises that have experienced economic shocks and to give them more assistance, so that they resume production and promote sustainable development once the pandemic has peaked.

In the more than three years since the pandemic broke out, Beijing's economic development has suffered considerably. Only 12 of the 38 major industrial categories saw a year-on-year profit growth from January to November last year, the rest suffering varying degrees of losses. For example, in the first three quarters of 2022, the operating revenue of small and medium-sized enterprises above

the designated size in Beijing fell by 1.7 percent year-on-year, with the total profit decreasing by 2.4 percent, and the jobs offered by them declining by 4.3 percent.

Beijing has introduced a series of policy measures to stabilize growth and ensure people's livelihood. Last year, Beijing launched a number of policy measures to help enterprises, including by further reducing their operating costs, increasing financial support, stabilizing industry and supply chains, and optimizing the business environment.

In 2022 alone, the extra tax reduction and tax rebates in Beijing reached nearly 200 billion yuan (\$29.53 billion). The implementation of these measures has not only made a positive contribution to Beijing stabilizing its overall macroeconomic market but also boosted the confidence of its market players.

However, it should be noted that although the pandemic has peaked,

the fundamentals underpinning economic development have not fundamentally changed. The overall environment for China's economic development remains severe, and demand contraction, supply shocks and weakening expectations have not been reversed, making it necessary to give enterprises space for "self-recuperation".

In the past three years, enterprises have borne a large portion of social costs for the entire pandemic prevention and control, and their production and operation have been significantly hit. This will restrict the country's overall economic growth. Therefore, the authorities should continue to reduce the burden on enterprises, cut taxes and fees on them, provide them with necessary subsidies, and create a better business environment so that they regain vitality in a loose and friendly market environment.

— BEIJING NEWS

Localizing drug production a win-win solution

Albert Bourla, CEO of US-based pharmaceutical company Pfizer, reportedly said at a conference on Monday that they had signed agreements with a Chinese enterprise for localized production of the anti-COVID-19 drug Paxlovid.

The announcement came just one day after the National Healthcare and Security Administration officially finalized the 2022 national healthcare list, which Paxlovid failed to enter because of its very high price. There is no information on the price that was quoted and the price the NHSA expected, but the fact that the drug failed to make it to the list

implies there was an unbridgeable gap, big or small.

The announcement on Monday further restores hope that Chinese patients, like their counterparts in the United States and elsewhere, have convenient, protected access to effective drugs in their fight against COVID-19. Even though Paxlovid failed to make it to the national healthcare security list, China, Chinese companies and Pfizer are working to ensure stable supply of drugs for Chinese patients.

Apart from the possibility of producing Paxlovid in China, the NHSA has temporarily included the drug in

its healthcare security list and will pay for it until March 31, by which time infections will have peaked in most cities. In other words, Paxlovid will be available when Chinese people are most in need of it.

Azudine, developed by a domestic company, and Qingfei Paidu granules, a widely used traditional Chinese medicine, have both made it to the list. So, if Paxlovid is too expensive for some families to afford in the absence of support from the national medical security fund after March 31, Chinese patients will still have two other drugs to choose from.

— ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Rigorous self-governance crucial for Party

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, has 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. Xi made the remarks while addressing the second plenary session of the 20th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection on Monday.

The conference has made it clear that the Party should continue to uphold strict principles, apply strict measures and foster a rigorous environment for its self-governance, and the Party's self-reform should be carried forward staunchly. While pushing forward strict self-governance, efforts should also be made to encourage enthusiasm, initiative and creativity among Party members and officials.

To do a good job of governing the country, the Party should do a good job of governing itself, and the country will become strong only if

the Party maintains its strength. Therefore, full and rigorous self-governance should be an unceasing endeavor, and the Party should remain alert and determined to tackle the special challenges that it faces.

With 96.71 million members — as of the end of 2021 — the Party has become one of the largest ruling parties in the world, and therefore it is important that it can be run with effective systems and regulations, which should be continuously improved to ensure rigorous self-governance.

Prominent problems should be found in a timely manner. These problems, Xi noted, include, but are not limited to, failures to implement the decisions and prohibitions set by the central leadership, selective or compromised enforcement, protectionism in disregard of the overall interests and blindly copying others' solutions.

Therefore concrete measures should be taken to effectively remove bottlenecks, obstacles and difficulties in implementation and

enforcement, and to refine the mechanisms through which the CPC Central Committee's major decisions and plans are implemented.

The fight against corruption remains grave and complex, and the Party still faces uphill tasks in preventing new cases and rooting out existing ones. The Party should further enhance its efforts to address both the symptoms and root causes of the problem in a systematic way.

And coordinated steps must be taken to see that officials do not have the audacity, opportunity or desire to become corrupt, as Xi said.

To that end, pressure should always be kept on officials so that they do not become corrupt, the deterrent effect of a zero tolerance policy and harsh punishment should be maintained. Particularly, actions should be taken to prevent leading officials from acting for any interest group or power group, and to forestall any collusion between officials and businesspeople, or any infiltration of capital into politics.

— XINHUA NEWS AGENCY

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COMMENT

Andrew K.P. Leung

China a sunny spot amid global dark clouds

As 2023 begins, the world remains highly uncertain and fragile, with Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, saying she expects one-third of the world to be in recession.

Energy and food inflationary repercussions because of the Russia-Ukraine conflict remain rampant. Cassandras are having a field day on China's perceived doom and gloom, due to its decision to end the "dynamic clearing" pandemic prevention and control policy marked by increasing Omicron infections. Diplomatic rhetoric notwithstanding, there is no let up in the United States' anti-China semiconductor stranglehold, nor is there any easing of its no-holds-barred geopolitical encirclement.

False perception of doom and gloom

As a matter of fact, Western media reports are full of images of stretched hospital wards, overflowing mortuaries and barren pharmacy shelves, a picture of panic and pandemonium.

According to Nature, a prestigious science journal, 1 million people could die in China from the sudden surge in infections, barring re-imposition of preventive restrictions. Fears have arisen about the emergence of a new variant of the novel coronavirus or sub-variants of the Omicron variant. China is sharing the latest data with the World Health Organization, and while welcoming Chinese tourists, many countries are requiring internationally-recognized non-infection proof before entry.

So why do I think China is likely to be a comparatively sunny spot?

First, much misunderstood and misrepresented, the strict prevention and control policy did not mandate zero cases in all circumstances. It was used as a strategy to ensure earliest possible detection, isolation, treatment and cure. As a result, it greatly minimized deaths and prevented contagion from province to province.

According to Johns Hopkins University's analysis updated on Dec 31, 2022, China's COVID-19 mortality rate per 100,000 people stands at 1.2, compared with 331.65 for the US, 45.05 for Japan, and 38.46 for India.

It's very saddening that some senior citizens may die in the latest wave of infections, but it should be noted that there will be no significant change in China's extremely low mortality rate compared with the overall international rate.

In a way, China is a "victim" of its own success in shielding the vast majority of its population from the pandemic. As a consequence, "herd immunity" remains relatively low. While 90 percent of the population has received the first vaccination dose, only 76.6 percent of those aged 80 and above have got at least one dose, and only 40 percent have received a booster dose.

Beijing is now scrambling to vaccinate up to 90 percent of those aged 80 or above by the end of January. It is also building a database of people living with chronic diseases to maximise the rate of successful outcomes.

As the massive Chinese Lunar New Year migration starts (people returning home for Spring Festival family reunion), Beijing has

asked prefecture and township officials to urgently fortify pandemic defenses, including better manning clinics, stocking medicines, medical equipment, and free "medicine kits", raising the public's medical awareness, and using official information to counter rumours.

As for some barren pharmacy shelves in some cities, they largely reflected public hysteria due to the sudden rise in infections among family members, friends and colleagues. There is a mad rush to stock up on fever medicines such as ibuprofen and paracetamol, prompting the authorities to take measures to increase the production of these two drugs by four times in a month to 202 million tablets and 190 million tablets respectively. But it should be noted that many cities have already withstood the infection peak and gradually returned to normal.

With expert input, China, the same as other countries, has realized that the COVID-19 pandemic has become an endemic disease with a

US-led efforts at decoupling notwithstanding, China remains at the heart of the global supply and value chains, especially in the world's largest trading bloc, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which represents one-third of global GDP and a third of the world's population.

much lower mortality rate, albeit it is much more contagious now. In fact, most infected people get well after a week or so. As such, initial paranoia is slowly giving way to good-humoured acceptance of widespread but mild infections.

Right time to pursue second centenary goal

With the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China already three months behind us, it's time to recharge our batteries and make efforts to realize China's centenary goal of becoming a modern socialist nation including achieving "common prosperity" by mid-century.

Part and parcel of the trajectory is a surging middle-income group — expected to be 800 million strong by 2035 — a vast number of which came out in droves across China to celebrate the dawning of the New Year. With more than 400 million middle-income consumers at present, China is already the world's second-largest consumer market. And since

China is continuing to further open up while pivoting toward domestic consumption, it is set to become the world's largest consumer market in the coming years.

Many Chinese consumers are well-off enough to afford overseas travel, and the government has opened the borders to allow two-way flow of Chinese travellers, foreign visitors and university students.

According to an August 2021 report by Georgetown University's Centre for Security and Emerging Technology, Chinese universities are expected to produce more than 77 million STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) graduates annually by 2025. That number will outstrip that of the US by more than three to one if international students are excluded. In this regard, China's success in building its own Tiangong space station speaks volumes about its scientific and technological capabilities.

Besides, despite US semiconductor restrictions, China is leapfrogging into next-generation photonic and quantum chips. Along with a head start in various aspects of 5G technology, big data and the internet of things, China is staying ahead of the game in harnessing the "Fourth and Fifth Industrial Revolutions". And given its ubiquitous digital economy aided by robotics and automation, aging demographics are not an insurmountable challenge for China.

Pivotal position in global economy

US-led efforts at decoupling notwithstanding, China remains at the heart of the global supply and value chains, especially in the world's largest trading bloc, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which represents one-third of global GDP and a third of the world's population. China's pivotal position in the world economy is further entrenched with the massive Belt and Road Initiative, with railways, bridges, highways and ports linking up the region.

Even when some Chinese cities were under lockdown in October last year, some media reports, using the IMF's earlier estimate of only 4.4 percent growth, concluded that China would contribute 30 percent to global growth in 2023. Allowing for infection surges in the first quarter or so, the Economist Intelligence Unit has revised upward its forecast for China's real GDP growth from 4.7 percent to 5.2 percent in 2023. This is in stark contrast to the IMF chief's forecast of global recession.

However, the next couple of months are likely to be crucial because China still needs to keep a close eye on the epidemic since it took new rules on Jan 8. With Beijing's proven track record of massive mobilization of personnel and resources, the light of hope is right in front of us as President Xi said in his televised New Year speech.

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SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

Zhang Chunfei

Time to revitalize platform economy domestically and beyond

With China adjusting its policy on COVID-19 since Jan 8, China's economic recovery is widely expected to accelerate. And the platform sector should play a bigger role.

China's annual economic tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference, which concluded on Dec 16, stressed the need to vigorously develop the digital economy, strengthen normalized supervision, and support the platform companies so they can help boost economic growth, create more jobs and compete in the global market.

The platform economy has become a significant driver of economic and social development because it has been playing an important role in optimizing resource allocation, accelerating industrial upgrading and promoting economic growth.

China's platform economy has been developing at a slower rate since 2021 due to the macroeconomic downturn, declining demographic dividends, strengthened supervision and the fast-changing international landscape. Fortunately, the Central Economic Work Conference said the country will support the development of the platform economy despite the various economic challenges.

The conference also said the foundations for China's economic recovery have yet to be strengthened, and the country is still under pressure due to shrinking demand, supply shocks and weakening expectations amid an uncertain global environment.

The platform economy was affected by the macroeconomic downturn last year, and its growth rate dropped by 11.2 percent

year-on-year in the first 11 months even though online retail sales increased by 4.2 percent, data from the National Bureau of Statistics show. The depressed consumer confidence is reflected in the declining revenues of big e-commerce players such as Alibaba, JD and Pinduoduo.

However, the Chinese economy is very resilient, and it still has great potential and vitality. Since the fundamentals sustaining its long-term growth have remained strong, the economy is expected to recover this year thanks to the optimized COVID-19 strategy and resumption of full economic activity, including production.

International experiences show a country's consumption market recovers due to shifts in the COVID-19 prevention and control strategy after a wave of rising infections. Accordingly, the Central Economic Work Conference proposed measures to raise public expectations and boost people's confidence in the country's continuous development. This means efforts will be made to stabilize growth, employment and commodity prices so that major economic indicators stay within a given range, creating a healthy environment for the platform economy.

China can provide more resources for the platform economy because it leads the world in terms of information technology infrastructure construction, and has built the world's largest and technologically advanced network facilities, covering 500 million families with gigabit fiber-optic networks, with 2.25 million 5G base stations.

By the end of August last year, the number of mobile internet of things connec-

Moreover, the development model of the platform economy is undergoing structural changes, and platform enterprises are expeditiously transforming their businesses, boosting innovation and raising their competitiveness levels.

tions in China had reached nearly 1.7 billion. China's scale and ratio of mobile IoT connections have surpassed those of many developed countries such as the United States, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Germany.

Last year, the authorities introduced several policies to promote the healthy development of the platform economy in a bid to support platform enterprises that had been suffering due to declining revenues and shrinking market capitalization since 2021. In fact, an array of positive signals sent by the central government has laid a solid foundation for the growth of the platform economy this year onward.

Well-regulated and healthy development is a prerequisite for platform enterprises to receive government support. So they should not repeat past mistakes such as making efforts for rapid expansion and trying to artificially create low-level, homogenized competition. Instead, platform enterprises should pursue high-

quality development, boost innovation in technology and create a better future for Internet Plus.

Moreover, improving the level of supervision is necessary to facilitate the healthy development of the platform economy. For example, many developed countries have strengthened supervision on platform enterprises in recent years, which bolstered the growth of innovation-oriented companies.

China's revised Anti-Monopoly Law, which was implemented last year, conforms to the rule of competition for the platform economy. According to the law, platform enterprises should not use data and algorithms, advanced technology and capital, and not misuse rules to indulge in monopolistic behaviors. Besides, the authorities have been strictly regulating monopolistic behaviors, in order to create a fair and transparent business environment this year.

Moreover, the development model of the platform economy is undergoing structural changes, and platform enterprises are expeditiously transforming their businesses, boosting innovation and raising their competitiveness levels. As such, they are expected to enter a new stage of business expansion and cross-border e-commerce in 2023.

Platform enterprises are adjusting their investment and marketing strategies according to the development of industrial internet systems because of the slow growth of consumer internet services and great potential of the industrial internet, which is reflected in the official recognition

for industrial internet platforms developed by internet giants such as Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu and JD last year.

That the industrial internet has a very bright future is beyond doubt. As the world's manufacturing and internet powerhouse, China's complete industrial system, innovative ICT sector and vast domestic market can help realize the huge potential of the industrial internet and help platform enterprises' transformation and upgrading.

That Chinese platform enterprises are extending their footprint to overseas markets is well known. For example, Tencent has been repeatedly emphasizing since 2021 that it aims to earn half of its gaming revenue from outside China. And TikTok actually topped the list in terms of average time spent on a platform by Android users at 23.6 hours a month, followed by YouTube and Facebook, in the first quarter of 2022.

Furthermore, China is expected to deepen reform and further open up its economy so as to boost cooperation among digital economies around the world, facilitate the development of the Digital Silk Road, and promote multilateral digital economy partnerships and high-level trade agreements. This means China's platform enterprises will not only grow domestically but also extend their operations across the world.

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GLOBAL VIEWS

GONG TAO

Strong foundation to build on

Jan 12 marks the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Angola. Friendly relations between China and African countries are a historical choice made by both sides. China is the world's largest developing country while the African continent is home to the largest number of developing countries. Dubbed "the treasure trove of Africa", Angola is an important country in the African continent, enjoying a good geographical location, beautiful scenery and abundant natural resources. After its hard-won independence in the 1970s, Angola has made great strides in nation building and development, with its economy maintaining relatively fast growth, its national image progressing with each passing day, and receiving wide acclaim in the international community.

As a line from a Chinese classical poem says, "Good friends feel close to each other even when they are far apart." China is about 10,000 kilometers away from Angola, but the affinity between the two has never been affected by the mountains or oceans in between. Looking back on China-Angola exchanges over the years, the two countries have always respected and trusted each other, treating each other with all sincerity and sharing weal and woe. China has been firmly supporting Angolan people's just pursuit of national liberation, their unremitting efforts for lasting peace, and their great cause of building Angola into a prosperous and strong nation. On the other side of the equation, Angola has been unwaveringly supporting China on issues concerning China's core interests and grave concerns. The two are also working together closely on the global stage to jointly defend the legitimate rights and interests of developing countries.

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties 40 years ago, China-Angola relations have become increasingly solid and mature after standing the test of volatile international situations. The two countries have maintained frequent high-level exchanges and cemented their

China-Angola relations are practical, sincere and mutually beneficial



WANG XIAOYING / CHINA DAILY

mutual political trust. History has witnessed numerous milestone events of the China-Angola friendship — from the signing of the joint communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1983 to establishing a strategic partnership in 2010, from constructors of both sides jointly building large infrastructure projects to bilateral practical cooperation in all fields deepening and expanding, and from Angola becoming one of the first African countries to join the Belt

and Road Initiative to the two countries closely cooperating with each other under the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

The sound development of bilateral relations could not have been achieved without the care and guidance from leaders of both countries. Angolan President Joao Lourenco attended the 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit in early September and paid a state visit to China in early October the same year, becoming the first head of state

from Africa to pay a state visit to China after the 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit. President Xi Jinping met with Angolan President Joao Lourenco twice in about a month. Over the past few years, the two heads of state have kept in close communication through various channels, and have reached a series of important consensus. Bilateral friendly cooperative relations have been continuously consolidated and advanced, forging a pattern where in their interests are increasingly

intertwined and delivering tangible benefits to the two peoples.

Angola has been one of China's major crude oil suppliers, an important investment destination and project contracting market in Africa for China, and a priority of China's "going global" strategy and international capacity cooperation. China's direct investment in Angola during the past three years and accumulative investment in the country are both top of the list. Chinese crude oil imports from Angola accounted for around 8 percent of its total crude oil imports; and Angola has risen to be China's second-largest trading partner in Africa in 2022. It has been proven by facts that China-Angola pragmatic cooperation has achieved fruitful outcomes, becoming a pioneer and ballast for Sino-African friendly cooperation.

In the meantime, China has become Angola's largest trading partner, a major project contractor, and an important source of investment and financing. Chinese companies have repaired or built nearly 3,000 kilometers of railway, 20,000 km of road, over 100,000 social housing, over 100 schools and over 50 hospitals in Angola. The Chinese government has provided free assistance for the construction of the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre, Venancio de Moura Diplomatic Academy, vocational training center (Cinfotec), etc. in Angola. Thousands of talented youths from Angola have come to China to study or get trained and then gone back to their home country to contribute their wisdom and ability. Chinese companies have established large-scale farms in Angola and invested heavily in such industrial sectors as construction materials, iron and steel, daily-use chemical industry, home appliances, instruments, batteries, and packing materials. Currently, the top-selling auto and cellphone products in Angola are Chinese brands. The presence of made-in-

China and constructed-by-China goods are ubiquitous in Angola's major cities and towns, greatly improving local people's living, traffic and work conditions.

Upholding sincerity, real results, amity and good faith, the China-Angola relationship is more solid than gold. Following 40 years of ups and downs, the China-Angola friendship has remained true to the original aspiration. Both countries have sustained impetus to view bilateral relations from a long-term perspective, share a common dream of building a modern country, and have forged ahead in unity. The two countries have always been a community with a shared future, laying a solid foundation for embarking on a more splendid new journey of bilateral relations and injecting renewed impetus into elevating bilateral pragmatic cooperation to new heights.

Currently, both China and Angola are at a critical stage of development. Last October, the highly anticipated 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was successfully held in Beijing, and a new government was formed in Angola. The two countries share a similar political agenda and synchronized development pace. Further strengthening the bilateral strategic alignment, solidarity and cooperation is in line with the fundamental interests of the two peoples. China is willing to work with Angola to take the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties as a new start to further carry forward the traditional friendship between the two countries, bolster mutually beneficial cooperation, jointly cope with challenges and realize common development. Together, we will usher in a brighter future for China-Angola relations and build a closer China-Angola community and China-Africa community with a shared future in the new era.

The author is the Chinese ambassador to Angola. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

ZHANG XIUQING

COVID-19 and food security

China should take necessary measures given the uncertainty of the current international market

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the order of international food trade has been obstructed, the number of people suffering from hunger worldwide has increased significantly, and all the countries have taken measures to ensure food security.

The global food market has experienced unprecedented challenges. The grain price in the global market rose and fell sharply and the trend of financialization became more pronounced.

Comprehensively analyzing, prices of grain are fluctuating because, under the circumstances of a general balance in the supply and demand, and high inventory, in the global food market for many years, countries around the world have responded actively to the negative impact, frequently adjusted their financial policies such as interest rates and money supply, as well as agricultural import and export policies.

This convergence of policies among countries over a period of time is the prime reason. Also, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, international freight and logistics are facing huge challenges, raising the imbalance between global food supply and demand and triggering a global food crisis.

The supply for China's domestic grain market is abundant, the price is relatively less volatile, and the market is basically stable. The rise of grain prices in the international market has had a limited impact on China. However, the impact varies with grain variety. At present, the sharp fluctuations in the international market have spread to the domestic market and the impact on China mainly includes five aspects:

First, compared with the record high prices in European and American economies, China's price level is relatively stable. However, due to the high international inflation, it is also on the rise.

Second, in the first eight months of last year, China's imports of agricultural products dropped by 9.95 percent year-on-year, and grain imports fell 12.11 percent year-on-year. The reasons include poor logistics caused by the pandemic and the restrictive measures imposed by many countries on exports. The poor international logistics has spread as the pandemic has rebounded in many places in China since April 2022.

Third, the impact of rising international food prices is transmitted to China through trade and financial markets. In addition, the rising prices of crude oil, fertilizer and other bulk commodities have significantly increased feed costs. According to a survey, the prices of pig feed and poultry feed have increased by 2 percent and 4 percent, respectively, in April and May 2022, compared with the end of January. International food prices have fallen since May 2022. However, because of the continuous increase of interest rate in the United States, China's feed import costs remain high.

Fourth, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has not only pushed up international food prices, but also raised the global crop planting cost. Russia, the world's largest fertilizer exporter, accounts for about 40 percent of the world's exports. Since Russia suspended its exports of chemical fertilizers on March 10, fertilizer prices have risen internationally, including in China.

Fifth, since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, while the feed price has gone up significantly, the domestic prices of live cattle and sheep, as well as beef and mutton, have dropped because of the strict prevention and control measures China implemented and the reduction of logistics efficiency and the substitution effect brought by the continuous decline in pork prices. This has squeezed the profits from cattle and sheep breeding.

In view of the uncertainty of the

current international market and its impact on China, China should take measures in the following six aspects:

First, China should establish a big food security concept, sorting out the main agricultural products one by one, and further clarifying the priorities of domestic supply and imports according to the comparative analysis of domestic and foreign supply potential, cost benefit, importance and sensitivity of products and other factors. China should correctly understand the importance of the grain supply security, strengthen strategic planning, so as to ensure supply and price stability.

Second, China should build up its agricultural product market information system and technical teams for domestic and foreign market monitoring and early warning, improve the information collection and analysis of global agricultural product market, respond to changes in the international market timely, resolve domestic market risks, and ensure stable supply and price in the domestic market. It should offer guidance to market expectations, avoid irrational investor speculation and behavior, and appropriately guide the consumption of consumers.

Third, in the face of the complex global landscape, China should give full play to the scale advantage of the domestic market, improve its global supply chain of grain and important farm produce, enhance the ability to control international resources, form a more diversified import pattern, and reduce dependence on a few countries to reduce risks. It should improve the management of tariff quotas and state trade for important agricultural products, strengthen inspection and quarantine, determine the import scale, frequency and timing of different farm produce, and crack down on smuggling.

Fourth, China should optimize its



ZHANG YUJUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

grain logistics channels and build a modern grain storage logistics network. It should promote a national grain distribution network with a reasonable layout, smooth circulation, high safety and efficiency.

The main market areas should cultivate grain industrial parks to improve the grain value chain, support the development of agricultural facilities, encourage land circulation, optimize industrial integration, strengthen technology and information support, nurture brands, and help enterprises develop an operation and development model that integrates the demonstration of new varieties and new technologies, whole-process mechanized production and efficient ecological agriculture.

Fifth, China should launch and improve emergency grain processing, supply, storage and transporta-

tion networks, and enhance the utilization of resources. The planning of emergency supply outlets should take both urban and rural areas, including remote areas, into account. Transportation authorities should participate in the planning of the emergency transportation routes and capacity work. China should establish a long-term and stable coordination mechanism with transportation, logistics and other relevant authorities, and accelerate the establishment of an integrated multi-sector coordination management system. It should step up efforts to build big data for food security, and further ramp up the capacity for macro regulation and control of grain security.

Sixth, China should improve the management system for grain reserves, optimize the regional distribution and variety structure of

grain reserves, and ensure the quantity and quality. The scale of government reserves should be reasonably determined and a dynamic throughput and rotation regulation mechanism should be set up. China should make efforts to strengthen counter-cyclical adjustment, and improve the capacity of reserve throughput to stabilize the price fluctuations in domestic agricultural products market.

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LIFE

The smell of success

Incense producer has a burning desire to develop popular fragrances, report **Yang Feiyue** and **Zhang Yu** in Baoding, Hebei.

When Yang Jinqing takes out his bag of tools, people around him are usually in for a treat. As his fingers dance among the delicate tools, ranging from a mortar and pestle to a ruler and a special knife, that are neatly arranged on a long table, spices, wood powder and paste made out of various plants, such as elm barks, are mixed up and turned into incense of different shapes and sizes.

The man in his 70s executes every move with elegance at his home in Qingyuan district, Baoding of North China's Hebei province. As he lights up the incense, a waft of soothing fragrance follows in its wake and soon permeates the room. For decades, Yang has committed himself to the traditional incense craft in Qingyuan, which was named a national intangible cultural heritage by the State Council in June 2021.

The whole ritual can only be carried out manually. Traditional Chinese herbs, flowers, sandalwood, cypress and other natural spices are used for environment aromatization, sterilization and deodorization. "My ancestors were all involved in the incense industry," says Yang.

After the country's liberation in 1949, Yang's father was hired by a local production team as an incense processor and salesperson. Initially, Yang did not consider entering the industry, but was persuaded to pick up the necessary skills to earn an income for his family.

But, as he made inroads into the trade, he started to appreciate its unique appeal and charm.

Making incense requires many delicate steps and craft, from selecting the raw materials to actually molding the products.

First, one needs to ensure the main spices and the plant adhesives are in the right proportion, so the therapeutic effects can be achieved, Yang explains.

Then, the kneading procedure follows, as water is slowly poured in until a dough starts to form.

"The variations in adhesive viscosity and water usage will both affect the incense quality and are key in the production," Yang says, adding that the recipes were obtained through years of trial and error.

Next, the dough is further kneaded or squeezed into threads, pills, cakes or cones, before being fine-tuned through clipping.

"It's necessary since the incense length determines the burning time," he adds.

The final steps involve drying and cellar storage, which will keep the fresh incense from deforming or cracking and enhance its fragrance.

The country boasts a profound incense history that dates back to before the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC). The craft and its culture thrived during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) when it was one of the four most popular activities among scholars, on a par with tea ceremonies,



Above: Yang Jinqing, an inheritor of Qingyuan traditional incense making, a national intangible cultural heritage, in Baoding's Qingyuan district, Hebei province, demonstrates the selection of raw materials.

Below: A set of incense tablets and an electronic heater. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ink-and-wash paintings and flower arrangement.

It found wider popularity during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties when it was used to fend off disease, insects, mosquitoes and preserve people's health.

Since the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), incense has left its traces in the neighboring area of Qingyuan, when an incense burner was unearthed from the tomb of a Han prince, Liu Sheng, to the west of the district in 1968.

Qingyuan saw many incense workshops set up during the Song Dynasty, thanks to its close geographical location to abundant herbal resources hidden in the Taihang Mountains.

Yang's family incense business built its name in the region in the 1940s. It was halted for a while but it returned in the '80s, shortly after the country's implementation of the reform and opening-up policy.

"I felt the opportunity had finally come," he says.

Therefore, Yang got down to setting up his own incense business.

He went out of his way to inquire after, and purchase, incense production equipment and raw materials while visiting senior incense masters, from whom he gleaned valuable information. He also made his way to libraries in Beijing to study incense monographs.

When all the resources were ready, Yang experimented over and again before restoring and upgrading ancient incense recipes.



The variations in adhesive viscosity and water usage will both affect the incense quality and are key in the production."

Yang Jinqing, incense maker



His efforts paid off when he managed to present a dozen ancient incenses, including ambergris and those featuring the scents of rose and lily.

Yang also makes sure his products move with the times, rolling out thousands of incense products with a modern appeal.

He has innovated the traditional craft and concocted smokeless incense and developed a legendary product that, after burning, displays auspicious patterns

and characters. They have won him multiple national patents.

"They are key to ensuring Qingyuan incense takes the lead in the craft and product quality in the industry," Yang says.

To date, Yang has fostered long-term cooperation with foreign trade companies in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, and his products have made their way to overseas markets, including Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Europe, the United States and South Korea, where more than 40 million incense packages from his company have been sold.

"I hope where there are Chinese people, there is an incense culture," Yang says.

As his business grew, Yang has provided job opportunities for local residents.

To hammer home to employees the importance of product quality, Yang has destroyed many boxes of incense that failed to meet his high standards and expectations.

"We should hold ourselves to a higher bar and be thorough, ... so the goods can turn out to be of the highest quality," he says.

Yang's religious adherence to integrity has also won him a good business reputation. Once, a Japanese client placed a big order from his company after acquiring the incense during a prior visit to Chongqing. The client was willing to pay the same price as they had in Chongqing, which was much higher than that quoted by Yang's company. Yang insisted on giving the client the correct, lower

price. It won him a letter of thanks and appreciation for his honesty from the client.

With the increasingly expanding market, Yang has also led his team to develop auxiliary machines, such as those for molding, drying and packaging, to complement the manual procedures.

"The addition of the new machines has not only improved the efficiency of incense production, but also ensured the quality of products," says Yang Junming, who is in charge of the production workshop of Yang Jinqing's company.

All those efforts have helped fuel the popularity of Qingyuan incense.

According to local authorities, there are more than 500 local businesses in the incense production chain, from raw material collection, incense production, to packaging and equipment processing, and more than 50,000 people are engaged in the incense business.

Yang Jinqing has also helped to establish an engineering center for herbal incense in Hebei that specializes in studying ancient recipes and culture, as well as developing new crafts based on the fragrance.

He has also opened incense museums where the public can see the production process firsthand.

"I want future generations to appreciate the charm of China's incense culture and craft," Yang Jinqing says.

His son Yang Xueming is also engaged in the trade and brings a new vitality to it.

"We might think incense culture is very elegant and, therefore, far away from us, but it is actually very close to our lives," Yang Xueming says. "When drinking tea, playing chess, reading or writing, lighting an incense stick can help calm the nerves and concentrate the mind."

The young man has also integrated traditional incense culture with modern methods to help deal with the sleeping problems that plague modern people.

He worked with the traditional Chinese medicine school, Hebei University, and has developed a tablet that can release a sleep-aiding fragrance after being put on a specially designed electronic heater.

"The effects have been proved through many experiments," Yang Xueming says.

In December, the young man led a team to develop a series of incense products for use at night, which won gold at the Hebei Cultural Creativity and Tourism Commodity Creative Design Competition.

"I hope more people will participate in making incense, so it can become a rural industry that makes Qingyuan proud," Yang Xueming says.

"We'd like to inject new blood to this ancient craft and help it continue to spread its fragrance to more families."

Contact the writers at yangfeiyue@chinadaily.com.cn



From left: Yang Jinqing offers guidance to employees at his incense workshop in Baoding's Qingyuan district, Hebei province. A display of an incense set. Locals engage in producing Qingyuan incense in Hebei.



TCM provides healthy choice for rural Bangladesh

DHAKA — In the 1990s, following five years of study, Shahidul Islam, a Bangladeshi doctor, attained his undergraduate bachelor's degree in medicine and surgery from a medical university in Central China's Wuhan.

He also took internship training on acupuncture at the university's traditional Chinese medicine department.

At a popular clinic of Suoxi Healthcare Ltd, which was opened in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, in 2019 under the auspices of a foundation dedicated to charitable

activities, Islam now treats people using TCM.

The clinic has won the trust and gratitude of many patients.

Trained local medical staff, including professionals who returned with hands-on experience from study in China, provide patients with various TCM treatments, such as acupuncture and Chinese therapeutic massage, at the clinic, which recently held a free medical camp in a village in central Bangladesh's Madaripur district.

Villager Rizia Begum was happy to receive treatment from the clinic.

"I'm 70 years old. I've not seen such treatment before. This is a good treatment. I've been treated well," she says.

Md Delwar Hossain Khan had suffered with back pain for months. According to Khan, after treatment, it subsided. "This Chinese treatment has reduced my pain," he says.

Rahima Khatun, deputy commissioner of Madaripur district, says it was the first time that TCM reached the district.

"I believe that through this treatment, the common people of Madaripur who are suffering from various diseases will get some relief. I hope

they live a healthy life," she says.

Islam says he has been involved in acupuncture treatment since 1996. "I had a wish to spread traditional Chinese medicine with acupuncture to remote areas of Bangladesh."

As part of this initiative, he says he went to Panchkhola village of Madaripur district and treated hundreds of patients.

They had no understanding about acupuncture previously, he adds.

"Some people have given us feedback, saying that they feel much better after the treatment. My future

plan is to spread the knowledge and treatment of acupuncture to more remote areas and big cities by doing free medical camps," he says.

Islam has many ideas for the development of TCM in Bangladesh, including a plan for establishing an acupuncture association to promote the practice and related technology in Bangladesh.

He believes it is necessary to provide TCM healthcare services in the South Asian country's rural areas.

According to Mozammel Haque Khan, president of the China-Bangladesh Friendship Association, of which

Islam is general secretary, the association has been built around various professionals who are committed to providing free healthcare services.

He says that the free medical camp was held in the village in collaboration with a local welfare foundation, which is basically a joint effort between the friendship association and the Shashi Hospital.

"In the future, we will host this type of healthcare camp on a larger scale here and all over Bangladesh," he says.

XINHUA

LIFE

POETRY EMOTIONS

Evocative language and inspirational music combine to create a concert that celebrates the emotive beauty of Tang Dynasty verse and the lyrical capabilities of Mandarin, **Zhao Xu** reports in New York.

See you not! The Yellow River tumbling from the sky,
Rushing to the ocean by and by!

See you not! Shining mirror mourning white tufts,
Black silk at dawn, snow-white at dusk!

The lines, passionate and poignant with stirring reflections on the forceful and the fickle, are from Li Bai, an eighth-century Chinese poet whose literary brilliance and inventiveness has often been deemed unsurpassable.

Fueled by unbridled imagination which was in turn watered by the huge amount of wine he apparently imbibed, often in the company of the moon, Li's virile poems have come to epitomize his time — the Tang Dynasty (618-907), an extended period in Chinese history admired for its open society that embraced the rest of the world. (Think about the Sogdian merchants who traveled the ancient Silk Road to the Tang capital, where everything they brought — from spices, gemstones and silverware to their own song and dance — became reasons for celebration.)

Thus, it came as no surprise that this particular poem from Li Bai, tellingly titled *Drink to Me*, was the piece to open a concert that saw 15 soloists and 15 chorus members from around the world lending their voices — trained in the Western tradition of classical singing — to the ageless lines of 16 ancient Chinese poems, all from the Tang Dynasty. And they did so at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in New York, against a musical backdrop rolled out by the Philadelphia Orchestra, whose historic 1973 tour of China has made it an emblem of cross-cultural exchange between the two countries.

Yet none of this would have been possible without one man — Tian Haojiang, the internationally renowned opera singer who, 11 years ago, founded the iSING! Suzhou International Young Artists Festival, at which the show premiered in late 2020, before considerable changes were made for the world premiere on Saturday. From the idyllic eastern Chinese city of Suzhou, whose misty waters and manicured gardens have inspired more than a few generations of Chinese writers and artists, to New York, the show has come a long way to connect the dynamism of two cultures across time and space, and to demonstrate, in Tian's words, that "the Mandarin language is for Western concert halls".

"Our original mission was very clear: to promote Mandarin as a lyrical language for opera singers. If niche critical languages like Czech and Russian can make it into the operatic mainstream, Mandarin can be known and sung in the wider world — and even included in the curriculum, the way singers study Czech or Russian diction assiduously," says Katherine Chu, dean of the Tianjin Juilliard School, who's also the head coach and music producer of iSING! Suzhou.

Yet there was a problem. "To sing in Mandarin, you need a repertoire, which we quickly exhausted during the early years of iSING!," says Chu, who saw commissioning new works as the only way forward. The concert, titled *Echoes of Ancient Tang Poems*, is the result of a long and meticulous process that started in early 2020 when a group of Chinese literary scholars, critics and translators spent two months whittling 200 Tang poems down to a list of 20, which they deemed as the most suitable to be set to music.

What followed was another selection process, which lasted for five months and involved an international panel of judges. They sifted through more than 100 entries, submitted from 18 countries, by composers who served up their own unique musical renditions of, what seemed on the surface, to be something far removed from the cultural upbringing and immediate experiences of many of the candidates.

Or, maybe not, says Evan Mack, the only composer with two scores featured in Saturday's performance. One is for the poem *Up On the Crane Tower*, whose author Wang Zhihuan, born more than a decade before Li Bai in 688, philosophized about his own tower-climbing with 10 Chinese



Clockwise from top: Tian Haojiang (center stage) takes a bow with performers at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in New York; bass Wu Wei (left) and baritones, Igor Mostovoi (middle) and Valdis Jansons, sing to the music composed by Nicholas Bentz; and soprano Paula Malagon during the concert. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From left: Mezzo Phoebe Haines thanking the audience; American composer Evan Mack; Spanish composer Fernando Buide; and American composer Nicholas Bentz. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The precision and depth of the Chinese language is astounding. Being able to write melodies for this wonderful text connects with a universal need to convey our deepest inner emotions through the use of voice."

Fernando Buide, Spanish composer

characters that translate into "To see a thousand miles in the distance, up another flight one goes."

Yet it was the other 10 characters that came before these that gave Mack the entry point. Searching online for images of the Crane Tower — a replica exists in today's Yongji city, Shanxi province — Mack found a visual equivalent to Wang's lines, "The sun gliding down behind the mountain edge, the Yellow River flows seaward," and a familiar one.

"The landscape jumped out at me as it looks very much like where I currently live in the Adirondack in northern New York — I'm surrounded by mountains and rivers and I wake up every morning to a beautiful sunrise," he says. "For me, it's a familiar picture to paint musically."

From there, the composer went on to let Wang's lesson sink in. "Mountain climbing as a metaphor for life's ascendance is something I ascribe to," says Mack, whose answer to that physical and mental uplift would be a crescendo. "My music is constantly climbing. You'll hear in the background the flowing and fluttering of water, and then you'll hear recurring low-to-high notes throughout that whole piece.

"As the singer was singing the text, the orchestra was always striving for him to sing higher," he adds, noting that his piece also contains a serene aspect innate to the original poem. "A life's journey need not be daunting — instead of racing up a hill, one makes steady, stepwise moves."

Pure theatricality takes hold in Mack's other work, composed for a poem written by Du Fu, a towering literary figure, who, instead of allowing his sorrows to be washed down by alcohol like Li Bai, chose to nurture them at a time when his beloved country was torn apart by rebelling warlords in the mid-eighth century. This particular poem, in which Du's emotions run the gamut from "grief to relief" to quote Mack, is actually an exception — the author, reveling in the news of the royal army's victory, looked at his wife and children with tears of joy in his eyes as he entertained the thought of returning home to recovered land.

"You really have the feeling how tight this man had been clenching, and how much he had been holding onto in the days and months leading up to that moment. So my idea was to create a little theatrical scene that

captures this intense moment, a scene complete with two singers impersonating Du Fu and his wife," says Mack.

The pair's singing overlaid each other, before joining in unison, as they "discussed" the route back home. To treat the original text with what he called "utmost respect", the composer looked at the specific locations of those places mentioned by Du on a map, before overlaying his own "emotional map".

"Think of all the things someone would have to go through if they tied their fate to their country — those are the human emotions I went for," he reflects.

The same patriotism has coursed its way into another Tang poem, by Yang Jiong, a member of the literati who, by a stretch of imagination, envisioned himself forsaking "the life of a sheltered scholar" by "leading a hundred soldiers into war". It required another stretch of imagination for the American composer Nicholas Bentz, who, admittedly, was never one for "bombast", to come up with a score for what he dubbed "a war song".

"The poem's visceral imagery of burning flames, mounted soldiers,

howling wind and roaring drums provided me with something that I could latch onto to craft a narrative, and to create an environment for the architecture which is the poem itself," he says. "I let the poem guide my music, written initially for one vocalist, but later adapted for three bass-baritones, to convey the feeling of a gathering of men."

Despite the seeming ferocity, Bentz, who associates his personal style with a "surgical introspectiveness," says that, in the line "Snow has dulled the bright pennants", he did find "a stillness over the battlefield and a moment of reflection" that gives the poem a resonance and draws the composer's heart closer to the man he intended to open a dialogue with.

To the question, whether he has an analog in mind while composing, Bentz answers with a decisive no. "I wanted to get as close to the source as possible and let the poem stand on its own legs," he says. "So I tried to immerse myself in the aesthetics and used it as a filter through which I could express."

To do that, he has looked beyond the English prose translations and focused on the original text. "You

definitely get the images in the English translation, but unless you are really going character by character, you don't understand how those images unfold, how the characters are relating to each other, and which ones can be separated from the line and repeated without muddling or distorting the meaning," he says.

The composer says he believes that all the vocalists were up to their task on Saturday night, with their touching renditions that ranged from passionately ardent, to mightily brooding. One of them is Phoebe Haines, who first went to China in 2016 following a successful audition for iSING! at New York's Juilliard School, where the Londoner was studying privately with a teacher.

"To prepare us, both Mr Tian and Katherine have spoken a lot about each individual poet, their life and how they contributed to the art form. We also did a lot of work around the set formats of Tang poetry, whereby a piece typically contains four or eight lines, each made up of five or seven characters," she says. "They really went into granular detail."

"I believe there's a huge space between just being able to imitate the sound of something and then, on the other very far side of the spectrum, being able to speak the language fluently," she continues. "Between those two goal posts, there's a huge range of understanding that enables one to have a language without becoming a fluent speaker. For all of my colleagues onstage, when they sang in Chinese, they knew not just the pronunciation, but also the meaning of every single syllable, which allowed them to soak in the mood and the weight carried by each Chinese character."

With that being said, the mezzo herself, who also sings in Russian, German and Italian, has decided to take her engagement with the Chinese language one big step further. Since September 2020, she has been taking online Chinese courses with Beijing's renowned Tsinghua University, five days a week, four hours a day.

"It has given me a huge amount of purpose throughout the pandemic period," she says. It's a feeling shared on various degrees by her fellow artists of the show, among whom was the Spanish composer Fernando Buide, whose score was set for a poem dedicated to a parting friend, titled *Send-Off*.

"The poem, which not only celebrates friendship, but also evokes the farewell of those closest to our souls, resonated with me profoundly," says Buide, who wrote the music "right in the middle of the most severe lockdown in Spain".

"The precision and depth of the Chinese language is astounding. Being able to write melodies for this wonderful text connects with a universal need to convey our deepest inner emotions through the use of voice ... when I composed, the sounds of my childhood ended up appearing under the surface of the music in subtle and unconscious ways," says Buide, who calls his music "reflective and hopeful".

And hope was palpable in the air, as the composers, vocalists and orchestra members met in New York during the rehearsals and onstage, many for the first time since the outbreak of the pandemic.

"Remember I wrote this orchestral piece at a time when we could barely get six people into a room," says Bentz.

Now that travel to China has been gradually reopened, Mack is considering "taking one slice of something and going in-depth", which, in this case, could mean tracing the footsteps of Du Fu through mountains and rivers that might remind him of home in northern New York.

What would Li Bai have said if he were in the audience last Saturday? "He would have stood up, raised a glass of wine to the moon and told everyone to sing along," says Haines.

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Online Watch the video by scanning the code.

SPORTS

SOCCER

Seniors find their goal in life

Club gives elderly a sense of community and proves sport is for the young at heart

By LIANG XUAN
and SHI FUTIAN

They may not be fast or aggressive on the pitch nowadays, and the offside trap takes longer to spring than usual, but the senior players, even including some 80-year-olds, at Yiyou Soccer Club are all serious about soccer. Based in downtown Kunming, Yunnan province, the club has a history of more than four decades.

"We have about 70 active players, most of which are above 50 years old. We have six 80-year-old members, and the oldest player we have is 88," said sprightly 66-year-old club leader Sun Dianyun to China Youth Daily.

"We paid ourselves to build the pitch years before for about 90,000 yuan (\$13,293). And each week, we hold two training sessions. And now the club has become a sort of home for our senior players."

According to Sun, the club originated from students at Kunming No 1 High School when he and his friends were still teenagers.

"I still remember many students at our high school loved to play soccer. And to keep that passion and love, we decided to create a club," Sun added.

"At the very beginning, there were just four people in our club and I was the youngest. But now I'm the only one left in this world. They all passed away, but we keep our passion to the sport."

Soccer's lifetime passion to all four founders of the club. The most high-profile founder among the four was former China international Ma Kejian, who also worked years as an official at the Chinese Football Association. And the other two founders, Gao Zupei and Bai Yunxiang, worked at the local sports departments in Kunming for decades before retirement.

And that passion towards soccer is shared by all members of the club. Among them is 84-year-old Li Chongzhi, who was also an alumnus of the high school.

"I still remember there were two



A soccer club in southwestern Yunnan province has become a sort of home for about 70 players, among which most are aged over 50, including six 80-year-olds. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

standard pitches at our high school. The first thing for the students after class each day was to rush to the pitches," said Li, who was a player of Yunnan provincial team and then became a coach of the Yunnan team.

"Also PE class was very important to all of us. There are other two 80-year-olds in Yiyou club were students of our high school, they were also professional soccer players before."

Sun told China Youth Daily that at the very beginning most members were students and alumnus of the high school. But later on, more and more senior soccer lovers joined in the club.

“What we need for grassroots soccer development is such passion. At the age of 70 or 80, people can still gather together for the sport that we love. Even being able to stand on the pitch is such an amazing achievement. Can I still play at their age? Looking at them, I don't seem to have a negative answer.”

He Qingwei, a member of the Yiyou Soccer Club

"We even participated in the national competitions for seniors. More and more people joined in, and they had different backgrounds such as police officers, physicians and even opera singers. However, most of our members had experience in professional teams when they were young," said Sun.

"Many of our senior players believe that as long as we can still play, the spirits of Yunnan soccer will remain. The meaning of our group name, Yiyou, was friends from No 1 High School as Chinese word Yi refers to No 1. But gradually it has already changed to just a group of friends who loves soccer."

Eight years ago, the self-funded club built their own five-a-side pitch next to a local market. They even have a "multifunctional" dressing room, which features a kitchen, a shower, a big TV and even a mahjong table for after-match relaxation.

"Some of our members donated 10,000 yuan and some donated a few hundred yuan. That's how we built this place. We just need to have a place so we can be connected to soccer and each other," said 81-year-old Chen Xiaokun, who used to be a national-level soccer referee and soccer commentator.

"After training, we cook food here and we eat together. Most of the members who have retired would eat here at the club after training, but those who are still at work would return to their offices."

As many club members are senior players, safety at training or in competition is the priority. The club has comprehensive regulations. For example, players who are above 70 must wear a green armband. Other players need to avoid, or at least reduce, physical contact with those wearing an armband.

Forty-year-old He Qingwei is one of the youngest in the team, and for him, he has other regulations to consider.

"I have some rules for myself, such as passing more often to the senior players. I used to play here with my dad, and even after he passed away, I still want to come," said He.

"Many of the senior players are actually very experienced as they played professionally when they were younger. I still can learn from them. But what touches me the most is their passion to the sport."

"What we need for grassroots soccer development is such passion. At the age of 70 or 80, people can still gather together for the sport that we love. Even being able to stand on the pitch is such an amazing achievement. Can I still play at their age? Looking at them, I don't seem to have a negative answer."

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Poor form puts Chelsea's faith in Potter to the test

LONDON — Four months into his reign as Chelsea manager, Graham Potter is under pressure for a run of form that would have seen many of his predecessors at Stamford Bridge fired during the Roman Abramovich era.

A 4-0 thrashing at the hands of Manchester City on Sunday means the Blues are already out of both domestic cups. They sit 10th in the Premier League, 10 points adrift of even a place in the top four.

It is not the start the club's new American owners will have expected after spending over 300 million pounds (\$365 million) on new players to improve a squad that finished third in the Premier League last season.

Judging by the dissenting voices of the fans, it is the consortium led by chairman Todd Boehly that is responsible for the malaise on the field.

As Chelsea chased City shadows at the weekend, the traveling support at the Etihad rebelled by chanting the names of former manager Thomas Tuchel and former owner Abramovich.

Tuchel was ruthlessly sacked by the new regime just seven games into the season in what appeared a sure sign that the hire-and-fire culture was set to stay at Stamford Bridge despite Abramovich's departure.

The Russian had shown no mercy to even illustrious managers such as Jose Mourinho, Carlo Ancelotti and Antonio Conte, who won Premier League titles during their time at Chelsea.

Despite making his name as a Premier League manager in three impressive seasons with Brighton, Potter does not have the CV to match many of his predecessors.

But Potter believes times have



Chelsea's head coach Graham Potter walks off the pitch at the end of the English FA Cup match against Manchester City on Sunday. AP

changed at Chelsea. He says a more patient approach promised by the new owners was one of the things that attracted him to leave Brighton in September.

"There's a completely different ownership," Potter said after also losing to City 1-0 in Chelsea's last league outing. "This is hard for people to get their head around as Chelsea for 20 years has been one thing and now all of a sudden it's different."

"The reason for me to take the job was because you've got a chance to shape a club that is in a massive transitional period."

One thing in Potter's favor is that Chelsea's 280 million pounds transfer spend in the summer window took place before he arrived.

It also took place after the club's transfer guru Marina Granovskaia and goalkeeper turned technical and performance advisor Petr Cech departed with Abramovich.

Boehly stepped in to head up the recruitment as sporting director. The result has been a scattergun approach to the transfer market.

The signings of veterans past their peak, such as Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Kalidou Koulibaly,

already looks like money wasted, while more than 50 million pounds has been splashed on a number of promising youth prospects not yet ready for the first team.

Boehly's approach has been compared to a fan playing the video game "Football Manager" by former Manchester United captain Gary Neville.

Potter has also been hamstrung by a long injury list.

N'Golo Kante has not played since August, England internationals Reece James and Ben Chilwell missed the World Cup and have suffered lengthy layoffs and Chelsea's most expensive summer signing, Wesley Fofana, has been restricted to four appearances.

Raheem Sterling and Christian Pulisic have also been ruled out for the next few weeks and Armando Broja's season is over after he suffered anterior cruciate ligament damage.

"We've had a massive transition and problems in terms of injuries don't make it easy to be stable," added Potter.

Infantino meets Swiss prosecutors

FIFA President Gianni Infantino met with special prosecutors in Switzerland on Tuesday as part of their criminal investigation into his undisclosed meetings with the country's attorney general during a wider probe of soccer officials.

Criminal proceedings against Infantino were recommended in 2020 by a previous special prosecutor — who was later removed from the case by a Swiss federal court — for possible incitements to commit abuse of public office and breach of official secrecy.

The case potentially implicating Infantino is now moving forward in his home country, weeks after he oversaw the World Cup in Qatar and about two months before he is due to be re-elected unopposed by FIFA member federations.

Special prosecutor Hans Maurer confirmed in an email to The Associated Press that "a confrontation hearing was held in the proceedings," conducted by himself and a second prosecutor, Ulrich Weder.

"However, I do not comment on the time, scope and purpose of this hearing," Maurer wrote.

The two prosecutors were elected at the Swiss parliament in December 2021 to continue an investigation relating to three undocumented meetings held in 2016 and 2017 involving Infantino and then-attorney general Michael Lauber.

The meetings started soon after Infantino was elected FIFA president in the fallout from American and Swiss investigations of suspected corruption in international soccer that forced his predecessor Sepp Blatter out of office.

After the meetings were revealed by media starting in 2018, both Lauber and Infantino said the meetings were routine but claimed not to recall details or to have taken notes.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Agent accuses FFF boss of improper conduct

PARIS — A sports agent has accused the president of the French Football Federation (FFF) of improper conduct over several years, saying he only was interested in her sexually.

Noel Le Graet has had a tumultuous week in France after saying he "couldn't care less" about Zinedine Zidane's future as a coach, and the latest accusation led to calls for his resignation Tuesday from the head of the French Football Federation's ethics council.

The troubled 81-year-old soccer executive has previously faced claims of sexual harassment and the French federation is the target of an investigation ordered by Sports Minister Amelie Oudea-Castera.

The agent, 37-year-old Sonia Souid, said in an interview with L'Equipe sports daily that Le Graet repeatedly tried to approach her from 2013-17.

She said that while she wanted to develop a business relationship with Le Graet to promote women's soccer, he was more interested in leaving messages on her voicemail late in the evening to invite her to drink champagne.

France's sports minister ordered an investigation into the federation in September after the body said it would file a defamation lawsuit against So Foot magazine, which reported that Le Graet allegedly harassed several female employees.

The French magazine published a six-page investigation quoting anonymous former and current employees, and inappropriate text messages that Le Graet allegedly sent to the women. So Foot also described an alleged toxic culture at the federation.

Souid, who said she first met Le Graet in 2013, also told L'Equipe that he texted her to ask her out or

tell her he missed her. Souid said he never went too far verbally but made clear she should have sex with him to move her ideas forward.

"He never looked at me like an agent but like a piece of candy," Souid said.

Souid said she was hurt by Le Graet's attitude and that she thought about ending her career as an agent. Asked whether Le Graet helped her professionally at some point, Souid said he helped her find the phone number of coach Corinne Diacre and that he tried to help her with business class plane tickets for France player Amandine Henry.

Patrick Anton, head of the FFF's ethics council, issued a statement Tuesday urging Le Graet to leave his post.

"We call on the president of the Federation to withdraw from his duties and therefore to resign," the statement said. "We need leadership that is strong and serene, which unfortunately is no longer the case."

In addition to his role at the French soccer federation, Le Graet also has been a member of the FIFA Council since being appointed by UEFA in May 2019. The position pays \$250,000 annually.

Le Graet is currently a candidate for another four-year term on FIFA's ruling committee. He is being challenged for the seat by Portuguese soccer federation president Fernando Gomes. The election is set for April 5, when UEFA member nations meet in Lisbon.

Le Graet's candidacy must pass a FIFA-run eligibility and integrity check. He can stand for election despite UEFA imposing an age limit of 70 for candidates to its own executive committee.

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