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CHINA DAILY

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President Xi Jinping, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, greets people from all walks of life across the country on Wednesday while meeting with them via video link from Beijing. Xi wished Chinese people of all ethnic groups a healthy and happy Year of the Rabbit.

PHOTOS BY XIE HUANCHI AND LI TAO / XINHUA

Xi extends festive greetings to nation

President holds video meetings with residents across the country ahead of Lunar New Year

By **CAO DESHENG**
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President Xi Jinping sent his festive greetings on Wednesday to people throughout China ahead of Spring Festival, or Lunar New Year, which falls on Sunday.

During meetings via video link with people from all walks of life in different regions of China, Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, called for implementing the epidemic control measures in the new stage of COVID-19 response and ensuring that people of all ethnic groups across the country spend a safe and happy festival.

Through the video link, Xi talked with and sent his greetings to members of the public from Beijing, and Heilongjiang, Fujian, Henan and Sichuan provinces and the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

Among those participating in the meeting were medical workers in a hospital, senior citizens at a welfare home, workers at an outlying oilfield, travelers and staff members at a high-speed railway station, vendors and customers at a wholesale market, and people in an ethnic minority village.

Xi said that every year before Spring Festival, he usually goes to see the people at the grassroots level. "I would like to chat with them to see what difficulties they still have, hear what plans they have in the new year, and share with them the festive happiness," he said.

Xi said: "This year, I choose to use the video link to see more places. Despite the screen separating us, I can still feel the strong festive mood in different parts of the country, and feel your joy and happiness. My heart is always with the people of all ethnic groups of the country."

He noted that Spring Festival is a traditional festival of the Chinese nation and also a happy moment for family reunions. "My biggest wish is that everybody spends a happy festival," he added.

Xi urged Party committees and governments at various levels to make earnest efforts to ensure adequate power, gas and heating supplies, provide people with abundant food and strengthen supervision over food safety.

During the Spring Festival holiday, efforts must be made to implement the various epidemic prevention and control measures formulated in line with the COVID-19 response situation in the new stage, guard against emergencies and accidents and ensure that people around the country enjoy a happy, safe and harmonious festival, he said.

Speaking on epidemic control, Xi said that over the past three years, China has carried out a rigorous COVID-19 response policy, which has proved to be the correct choice, and the nation withstood the attacks of various rounds of virus mutations and reduced the rate of critically ill patients and the death rate caused by COVID-19 infections.

As the COVID-19 response has entered a new phase and the situation remains grave, Xi called for further increasing medical resources, raising the capacity for providing medical services, increasing medicine supplies, particularly making all-out efforts to treat critically ill patients, and ensuring the normal order of medical services.

Looking back, Xi said that the past year was extraordinary and momentous. People on all fronts around the country have worked in unity to prevail over various difficulties and challenges, and made contributions and achieved new progress. "Every one deserves credit!" he said.

This year is the beginning of fully implementing the guiding principles of the 20th CPC National Congress. Xi expressed his hope that in the new year, all the Chinese people will firm up their confidence and work hard together to make greater achievements.

WORLD WATCH
By Shakeel Ahmad Ramay

The West's propaganda war will fail to contain China

Although the world has entered 2023 with multiple challenges, Western hegemonic powers seem incessant in their propaganda war against China, intensifying it with objectives of undermining and containing China, by hook or by crook.

The hegemonic powers have deigned to use multiple traditional and nontraditional tools like trade, technology, cultural invasion and ideology to strengthen their malicious propaganda campaigns.

With a widened scope and more aggressive applications, these powers cling to the presumption that a well designed, well explained and well communicated lie is worth more than 1,000 facts. Following this philosophy, they have coined terminologies like "debt trap", "violation of human rights", "curbs on freedom of speech" and many others, applying them even to China's partners.

For example, the United States has allocated $200 million in the name of democracy and gender equality for Pakistan on an annual basis. This is one example from one country. The real target can be the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The corridor project is subject to sabotaging efforts to deprive Pakistan of an economic development opportunity and turn the corridor into a sign of Chinese failure to help its iron brother. Therefore, forces are trying to push and pressure Pakistan into default.

However, despite such instruments, the hegemonic moves will not be able to contain China due to certain facts.

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Record FDI inflows expected in 2023

By **LIU ZHIHUA** and **ZHONG NAN**

China's foreign direct investment inflows are expected to hit a new record in 2023 and will probably rank first in the world, experts said on Wednesday.

This is because the country's FDI surge against headwinds last year has indicated foreign investors' strong confidence in the Chinese economy, while the government's ramped-up policy efforts are expected to boost economic recovery and expand FDI inflows into key industries, inland regions and major projects, they said.

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Their comments came as the Ministry of Commerce said China's FDI, in actual use, hit more than 1.23 trillion yuan in 2022, up 6.3 percent year-on-year. In US dollar terms, the figure was 189.13 billion, up 8 percent year-on-year.

The performance was better than expected, given the domestic and external challenges, especially the growth rate for the manufacturing industry and major foreign investment projects — those with contractual foreign investment of more than $100 million each — being 46.1 percent and 15.3 percent, respectively.

"Amid subdued global FDI sentiments, the robust FDI growth last year indicated foreign investors are upbeat about the supersized China market and its improving business environment," said Wei Jianguo, a former vice-minister of commerce and vice-chairman of the China Center for International Economic Exchanges.

"China will become more attractive to them, with the wider opening-up and the anticipated rebound in its economic activity following optimization of the COVID-19 measures," he added.

Wei predicts FDI will grow at two digits to probably reach $220 billion to $230 billion in 2023, surpassing the United States, as the latter faces economic slowdown — and even a recession. China was the second-largest FDI recipient in 2021, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

In a circular released recently, the State Council said that China will support foreign-funded research and development centers, so that they can use large scientific research instruments, as well as reports and relevant data of major national science and technology programs, in accordance with Chinese laws.

Analysts have widely attributed China's robust FDI performance to the combined effects of the country's policy efforts and economic upgrade and expansion, which, they say, have largely offset disruptions from the epidemic and geopolitical issues.

As consumer activity recovers amid decreasing COVID-19 disruptions and concerted policy steps are made to prop up infrastructure investment and stabilize the property sector, China's economy is likely to see a robust rebound this year to further shore up FDI, they said.

Zhang Shaogang, vice-chairman of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, said, "China's new round of reform and opening-up will encourage global companies from the high-end manufacturing sector to further transform traditional industries with smart manufacturing technology in the country.

"Its industrial ecosystem and digitalization initiatives will play a crucial role in shaping the future in areas such as connected products, electric vehicles and clean power generation."

Considering that major FDI projects have high-standard industrial support system requirements, such as talent and industrial chains, Zhou Mi, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, said the FDI data last year showed that foreign investors are bullish on China's economic prospects and are placing more key links of their industrial chains in the country.

The National Development and Reform Commission said on Wednesday that China will improve implementation of its FDI policies and guide FDI into high-end manufacturing, modern services, high-tech and environmental protection industries.

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INSIDE
Shared interests can be basis for Sino-EU cooperation in Africa
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Timely assistance

An Afghan boy carries food and daily necessities he received from an NGO in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Tuesday. At least three leading international aid agencies have partially resumed their humanitarian endeavors in the country, after assurances from the Taliban that Afghan women can continue to work in the health sector. WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

YELLOW RIVER PROTECTION EFFORTS BOLSTERED

New law to safeguard waterway, strengthen its governance

By **ZHAO RUIXUE** in Jinan, **SHI BAOYIN** in Zhengzhou and **YUAN HUI** in Hohhot

in-depth

China's top legislature passed the Yellow River Protection Law on Oct 30 to further enhance the waterway's governance and protection. The law will take effect on April 1.

This is good news for Zhang Fei, who works at a Yellow River administration bureau in Kaifeng, Henan province. He spent the past 17 years building and guarding embankments along a section of the river.

Zhang's grandfather and uncle also worked to ensure safety along the waterway, and he learned a lot about the river from his grandparent.

"For generations, flood control was the major challenge faced by front-line workers on the Kaifeng section of the river," Zhang said.

The waterway zigzags for thousands of kilometers, carrying considerable amounts of silt. In the urban area of Kaifeng, the Yellow River poses challenges to residents' safety in the flood season due to its silt deposits, Zhang said.

He learned from his grandfather that the river burst its banks in 1953, when it rose about two-thirds of the way up an embankment in the city, putting hundreds of residents at risk. For nine days and nights, Zhang's grandfather led a team to repair the structure.

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PAGE TWO

River: Water conservation work urged

DENG GUOHUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

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In autumn 2021, some areas on the lower reaches of the river saw their worst flooding for two decades. Zhang and his teammates worked on the frontline for a month to keep embankments safe.

"Since the founding of New China, large-scale protection of the river has been carried out and great achievements have been made in flood control. Still, in flooding seasons, we never lower our guard, in order to keep the embankments safe," Zhang said.

Flooding is not the only challenge faced by those living in the Yellow River Basin.

According to experts, the river and its basin have long faced problems such as water shortages, water and soil erosion, and a deteriorating ecological system.

The Yellow River is regarded as China's mother river. For 3,000 years, its basin served as the nation's political, economic and cultural center.

The 5,464-km-long waterway flows through a total of nine provinces and regions, feeding 12 percent of the Chinese population.

Great importance has been attached to the river's ecological protection and high-quality development, due to the waterway's economic and cultural significance, as well as its environmental impact.

The Yellow River Protection Law passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress stresses the need for conservation of water resources in the river basin. It also calls for protection and restoration of the ecological system, flood control and pollution prevention measures, and the promotion of cultural inheritance, among other action to tackle problems such as water shortages and ecological fragility.

It is China's second river basin protection law after legislation on protecting the Yangtze River was adopted in March 2021.

Lu Dongfu, a member of the NPC Standing Committee, said the new law is extremely important and timely.

"Due to long-term human activities, the Yellow River's ecology has been greatly disturbed and damaged," Lu was quoted as saying by Guangming Daily.

Protection and restoration work has been carried out in recent years, but problems remain, such as excessive use of water resources, along with reclamation of the river and tidal flats, Lu said.

Excessive human intervention in the form of building artificial landscapes to protect the waterway's ecological system also needs to be resolved, as this work has damaged the river, he said.

Water conservation

Xu Anbiao, a member of the NPC Standing Committee, said there is a serious shortage of water resources in the Yellow River Basin.

There is not enough water for use in the provinces and regions through which the river flows, Xu said.

The new law includes measures to conserve water in the Yellow River Basin while enhancing the management of water consumption quotas and the price of water.

The legislation makes it compulsory for governments at county level and above to take into account the overall water demand for economic and social development, and to draw up water consumption quotas for sectors such as agriculture and industry.

The law imposes strict limits on directing additional water resources from the river to irrigate farmland. It stipulates that authorities at county level and above should promote water-efficient agriculture, strengthen construction of facilities to conserve water and meter water consumption, and cultivate drought-resistant crops to reduce the amount of water used for agriculture.

Ways to save water are being explored in Dezhou, Shandong province, a major agricultural base that needs to divert water from the Yellow River to irrigate the city's farmland.

In Pingyuan county, Dezhou, an agricultural cooperative that runs more than 1,330 hectares of farmland uses a data sharing cloud platform and automatic irrigation facilities to help water this land.

Data on the condition of crops, soil, temperature and humidity are collected and transmitted to the cloud platform through sensors installed in the fields. Farmers use this information to decide the best time to water crops, and the amount of water they need.

He Shibao, an agricultural technician at the cooperative, said, "With the water-efficient facilities, we need no more than 20 cubic meters of water for each mu (0.067 hectares), but when we used a traditional irrigation system, each mu of farmland needed at least 60 cubic meters of water."

The new law urges local authorities to tap the potential of sewage by using water-saving technology, other equipment and materials to meet water consumption demand. Reclaimed water should be the first choice to meet demands for landscaping, afforestation, production and construction, the law states.

Pollution control

In winter, flocks of migratory birds arrive in the Yellow River Delta in Dongying, Shandong, where the river flows into the Bohai Sea.

The Hukou Waterfall in Linfen, Shanxi province, attracts visitors in November. TAO MING / XINHUA

At the Yellow River Delta National Nature Reserve, which has been dubbed an "international airport for avian species", birds fly across the sky, whooper swans pass slowly over lakes, while other birds chirp in the woods.

In Kaifeng, Zhang, from the administration bureau, said more birds are being seen in the Yellow River Wetlands. "The birds know the ecological conditions here provide a good place to live," Zhang said.

In the past decade, local authorities have made great efforts to protect and restore the Yellow River Basin's ecological system.

The Yellow River Delta National Nature Reserve now boasts 1,630 animal species and 685 species of plants. The number of bird species has risen from 187 to 371, according to the reserve's management committee.

The new law states that protection and restoration work should include mountains, rivers, forests, fields, lakes, grass and sand.

The legislation strengthens the protection of snow-capped mountains and glaciers, plateau permafrost, alpine meadows, grassland, wetlands, deserts and spring fields in the waterway's conservation areas, as well as its main sources and tributaries.

To maintain the natural state of certain rivers and lakes on the upper reaches of the Yellow River, mining, sand mining, fishing, hunting and other activities are prohibited within the control area.

The new law makes it clear that coal mining and chemical projects are strictly prohibited within the control area of the river's main sources and tributaries.

In addition, the legislation calls for comprehensive treatment of pollution in agriculture, industry, and urban and rural residential areas of the Yellow River Basin.

Great achievements have been made in controlling pollution in recent years.

Some 23 years ago, the Fenhe River, the second-largest tributary of the Yellow River and the mother river of Shanxi province, was known for its pollution and foul-smelling water caused by coal and chemical factories.

Now, the Fenhe is clean and wide. Not only has the waterway's ecology been restored, but its surrounding environment has been significantly improved thanks to two decades of coordinated action to treat pollution.

Cultural protection

The Yellow River Basin is home to numerous cultural relics, ancient documents and other important cultural heritage items, and protecting them is key to promoting the inheritance of Chinese civilization.

The new law states the need to protect, inherit and promote the Yellow River's culture.

It stipulates that cultural, tourism and related authorities must record and file details of important heritage items such as cultural relics and historic sites, intangible cultural heritage, ancient books and documents to establish a basic database for Yellow River cultural resources.

The protection of intangible cultural heritage and tangible heritage in the Yellow River Basin should be enhanced, the law states. Such work includes well-known historical and cultural villages, towns and cities, historical and cultural blocks, villages with ethnic minorities, and ancient dikes and irrigation projects.

Every autumn, an arts festival featuring Manhan Opera, a national-level intangible cultural heritage, is staged in Jungar Banner, Inner Mongolia autonomous region, to promote time-honored Yellow River art forms.

Shi Weisheng, professor in the vocal music department at Inner Mongolia University, said Manhan Opera was created on fertile land in the Yellow River Basin. The art form integrates Yellow River and grassland culture, Shi added.

The new law calls for the best use of cultural heritage sites, museums, memorial halls, exhibition halls, education bases, water projects and other resources, and for the comprehensive use of information technology to systematically display Yellow River culture.

At a museum in Gaoqing county, Shandong, more than 20,000 items related to the Yellow River are on display, including documents on management of the waterway, tools and household utensils used in the Yellow River Basin, and ancient rubbings, books and letters about the river.

Wang Shuqing, 60, who has spent three decades collecting ancient items related to the river, said: "This material gives us the chance to study how people worked hard to manage the river and earn a good living from it. We can use these precious items to tell our children stories about the Yellow River."

Ma Jun, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee, said cultural and tourism resources need to be integrated to protect and promote the Yellow River.

The waterway's cultural connotations should also be analyzed from different perspectives of society, the economy, environment, science and technology, Ma added.

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Left: A folk opera troupe performs on the bank of the Yellow River in Weinan, Shaanxi province. ZOU JINGYI / XINHUA **Center:** Workers assemble solar panels to expand the use of clean energy along the river in Qinghai province. ZHANG LONG / XINHUA **Right:** Technicians measure the height of wheat grown on an experimental water-conservation field alongside the river in Wuzhong, Ningxia Hui autonomous region. WANG PENG / XINHUA

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TOP NEWS

Liu, Yellen meet for 'substantive', 'candid' talks

They agree to boost cooperation on green finance and enhance communications

By **WANG MINGJIE**
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Vice-Premier Liu He met with United States Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in Zurich, Switzerland, on Wednesday, for talks that were seen as improving bilateral relations while finding ways for China and the US to work together on tackling global challenges.

Both countries agreed to enhance communication on macroeconomic and financial issues, according to a joint statement released after the talks. The statement described the first face-to-face meeting between the two as "substantive, candid and pragmatic".

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The two sides also agreed to increase cooperation on green finance on a bilateral and a multilateral basis, such as within the frameworks of the United Nations, the G20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the statement said.

Yellen was invited to visit China this year, and the two sides agreed that their economic and trade teams will maintain communication at all levels.

The meeting was a follow-up to the one between President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden in Bali, Indonesia, in November, during which both leaders pledged to increase communication.

In a speech on Tuesday at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Liu urged world leaders to abandon the "Cold War mentality" and reaffirmed China's commitment to international cooperation and all-around opening-up, adding that "China's door to the outside will only open wider".

Global economic growth is expected to slow sharply this year amid rising inflation, higher interest rates and supply chain disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In its latest forecast, the World Bank said it expects US GDP to grow 0.5 percent this year, while China's GDP was projected to grow 4.3 percent.

Despite the tensions between China and the US in recent years, the total trade volume between the two countries in 2022 could reach, or come close to, an all-time high, according to the latest official US data through November.

Christopher Bovis, a professor of international business law at the University of Hull in the United Kingdom, said, "The significance of the meeting between the Chinese vice-premier and the US treasury secretary is not to be underestimated.

"Face-to-face communication, in diplomatic terms, usually indicates the gravitas of the situation amidst the big picture of international developments and the thematics of the 2023 Davos economic forum," he said.

Bovis said he believes the talks set the agenda that not only will dominate the Davos proceedings, but also project the parameters of current and future cooperation between the US and China.

While there are differences between the two sides, Bovis said: "The emphasis will be placed on collaboration and the avoidance of conflict and confrontation to settle disputes in trade and international matters. The world is moving towards a new era of cooperation with genuine foundations."

Vice-Premier Liu He (left) shakes hands on Wednesday with United States Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen as they meet for talks in Zurich, Switzerland. DENIS BALIBOUSE / REUTERS

Homeward bound

Passengers wait to board trains on Wednesday at Shanghai's Hongqiao Railway Station during the annual travel rush ahead of Chinese Lunar New Year, or Spring Festival, which falls on Sunday this year. It is the most important traditional festival for Chinese people and an occasion for family reunions. ALY SONG / REUTERS

Philosophy: Global initiatives proposed by nation contribute to world economic growth, development

From page 1

First of all, China has an entirely different philosophy of international relations, economic links and security cooperation. The guiding principles and values of the Chinese philosophy are mutual respect and win-win cooperation. China practices a relation-based ideology for building international relations, which is the opposite of the Western ideology of interest-based relations. China also believes in and practices the sharing of prosperity for meaningful international engagement. Programs such as the Global Development Initiative are good examples on this front, providing space for China to rise in a peaceful way.

Second, China is deeply integrated in the global system. China is a major trading partner of more than 100 countries. China has also signed multiple free trade and economic partnership agreements with many countries and regions. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is the world's largest free trade agreement, and China and the European Union are negotiating a comprehensive agreement on investment. China is also emerging as a new technology powerhouse.

The guiding principles and values of the Chinese philosophy are mutual respect and win-win cooperation. China practices a relation-based ideology for building international relations, which is the opposite of the Western ideology of interest-based relations.

Third, China has the ability to ignore provocations and observe patience. The world has witnessed this ability in the past. For example, Beijing exercised much patience on outside provocation regarding Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Fourth, China has put forth global initiatives in the fields of economy, development, security and diplomacy. On the economic front, the BRI is contributing to global economic growth and development. Thanks to openness and inclusiveness in decision-making and implementation, the BRI has become the largest economic, trade, connectivity and investment program in history.

In addition, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was established to create a people-centered financial system and strive for a financial system that keeps the environment and the needs of the future at the center of decision-making and implementation. It has become the second-largest global bank, with 105 members, after the World Bank.

Furthermore, the annual China International Import Expo was launched in 2018 to show the world how China has opened its market to the world. The CIIE confirms that China believes in practical steps and not merely slogans. The expo has been designed in such a way that it will promote rules-based, win-win cooperation and will create opportunities for the world.

In terms of security, President Xi Jinping proposed a new vision of achieving holistic security while focusing on dialogue and development. He launched the Global Security Initiative for common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. The initiative will help the world to combat new security challenges and secure sustainable peace, and it offers an alternative to the model of security based on alliances, Cold War mentality and hegemonic aspirations.

The propaganda war against China will not be successful because China is deeply integrated in the global system. Any attempt to destabilize China is an attempt to destabilize the global system, which no country wants. Further pursuit of such a propaganda war will put its designers on the losing end.

The author is CEO of the Asian Institute of Eco-civilization Research and Development, a think tank in Pakistan, and a visiting research fellow at Hebei University. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Laotians trained in China will cultivate rail specialists

By **LI YINGQING** in Kunming
and **ALEXIS HOOI** in Beijing

When Laotian teacher Thammavongsa Sengaloun heard about a railway trainee program in China, he signed up immediately.

Thammavongsa, 38, who used to teach electronics at a vocational technical college in Laos, said: "Learning Chinese is tough, and I have to spend six hours a day on just the language alone, but I'm determined to study hard. I cherish the opportunity to be in China very much."

He is among a pioneer group of 40 Laotian trainees who arrived in Kunming, the capital of Southwest China's Yunnan province, in March under a program to train railway specialists and educators to develop the pillar transportation sector in their home country.

The trainees will learn from Chinese instructors and industry professionals in a two-year course before returning to Laos, where they are then expected to spend at least five years helping to build an education system for the country's railway professionals.

The exchange is part of an arrangement between the two sides under which Chinese assistance to Laos in developing a vocational and technical institution will help with the maintenance and operation of the new China-Laos Railway. The rail line, a landmark project of the Belt and Road Initiative and a flagship project for the bilateral friendship, was rolled out in late 2021 to connect landlocked Laos with China's railway networks and enhance Laos' access to global markets.

The 1,035-kilometer railway runs between Kunming and the Laotian capital, Vientiane. The trip between the two cities takes about 10 hours at speeds reaching 200 km/h.

With the rollout of the railway and supporting projects, Yunnan is poised to become a talent training hub for South and Southeast Asia.

Duan Yubo, director of academic affairs at the Kunming Railway Vocational and Technical College, where the Laotian trainees are studying, said the course material covers six railway majors ranging from locomotives and engineering to power supply and communication signals.

"Through simulation training, they can better master the latest technology of Chinese railways, and they can bring this knowledge back to Laos," he said.

In addition to learning the Chinese language and railway-related vocational skills, the 40 trainees, with the help of Chinese teachers and technicians, will learn how to establish professional standards regarding teaching methods, curriculum and textbooks, for later application in Laos, Duan added.

Li Weiguo, dean of continuing education at the Kunming college, said the 40 Laotian trainees, who range in age from 22 to 40, will become the first teachers of a planned Laos railway vocational and technical college.

"Before the Laotian students came to China, our college hired a professional international Chinese teaching team to start online language teaching," he said.

"After the students arrived, the college also connected them with Chinese students and teachers who speak Laotian to help them integrate into the Chinese learning environment."

According to plans for the training program, Chinese railway standards will be shared and applied in combination with the situation in Laos, with the additional goal of cultivating vocational talent who understand Chinese culture, can master Chinese technology and can help build cross-border ties.

Yang Guowen, deputy general manager of Yunnan Construction and Investment Holding Group, said the Laos railway college, with Chinese government support, will be able to accommodate 1,000 full-time students and meet the needs of 300 employees for short-term skills training each year.

Thammavongsa, the Laotian trainee, said, "We want to work hard to acquire the requisite knowledge and return to Laos as soon as possible to participate in the development of the Laos railway."

Like many other fellow trainees, Soulisak Vongphachan, 23, said his family has also been very supportive of his choice to learn as much as he can in China.

"I would also like my 19-year-old brother to study in this school and learn about railways," he said. "After the opening of the China-Laos Railway, the life of the people of Laos has improved a lot."

From December 2021 to October last year, the total volume of cross-border cargo transportation on the rail line exceeded 1.72 million metric tons, with an average of more than 5,000 tons a day, accounting for 52 percent of land transportation volume in Laos, according to the country's railway authorities.

Cun Min, deputy director of the Yunnan provincial commerce department, said the authorities are committed to improving the efficiency of passenger and cargo transportation on the railway, speeding up domestic and cross-border connections, and maintaining the safety and efficiency of logistics networks.

The convenience of customs clearance has also continuously improved, she said. Goods delivered via the rail link have expanded to more than 1,200 varieties, including electronics, photovoltaics and cold-chain fruit.

A Laotian trainee receives course instructions at Kunming Railway Vocational and Technical College in Yunnan province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"These achievements are due to the joint efforts of China and Laos, as well as the focus and participation of many groups and people," Cun said. "I hope that we will continue to work hard together to achieve greater success."

Khampheng Latmany, deputy director of the general office of the Laos-China cooperation committee, said the peoples of Laos and China have a long history of friendly exchanges, with important projects like the railway and its related programs making positive contributions to the economic and social development of Laos and improving people's lives.

"This project is not only one of the important achievements of the Belt and Road Initiative, but also an important step for Laos to realize the strategy of turning a landlocked country into a land-linked country," he said.

Laotian railway trainee Phonvilai Weobaiudib, 30, said he hoped the Laos railway network will eventually stretch to places like Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Regarding the training program, he said that there "are still many 'blanks' in the Laotian language for professional railway terms".

"Only by studying hard can we undertake the important task of cultivating railway talent for Laos."

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CHINA

Subway surprise

The mascots for the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022 take the subway in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, on Wednesday. The event was postponed due to COVID-19 last year, but will be held this year from Sept 23 to Oct 8.
LYU ZHIYAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

Soybean growth hits record high

Despite floods and drought, government effort to expand grain, oil crops pays off

By **LI LEI**
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A mix of methods, including crop rotation and intercropping, have been used to expand the growing area for soybean and rapeseed, which are central to making cooking oil and animal feed, agriculture officials said on Wednesday.

There were 10.26 million hectares of soybeans on the mainland last year, the largest amount since 1958 and an increase of 1.82 million hectares year-on-year, Zeng Yande, chief agronomist of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, said at a news conference held by the State Council Information Office in Beijing.

Pan Wenbo, director of the ministry's crop farming management department, said that soybean output rose to 20.28 million metric tons, 3.89 million higher than in 2021. "It was the first time the soybean output on the mainland has surpassed 20 million tons," he said, adding that this helped raise the soybean self-sufficiency rate by 3 percentage points in a single year.

Oil crop output edged up 1.1 percent to 36.53 million tons last year, said Zeng, who also heads the ministry's development and planning department.

The improved supply, coupled with a national campaign to encourage frugality in the catering sector, has led to a 1.6 percentage point rise in self-sufficiency in overall cooking oil production, he added.

Pan explained that the increases were the outcome of a project rolled out last year by the central government to expand the cultivation of soybean and other oil crops.

He said the ministry had employed a range of techniques to accomplish a "political task that cannot fail".

In Northeast China, a traditional soybean growing area, farmers have rotated the crop with corn.

In places such as Northwest China and the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, growers were encouraged to intercrop soybeans and corn if conditions allowed. More than 1,000 counties scattered across 16 provincial regions were involved, Pan said.

As for rapeseed, grain fields in southern provinces left vacant during winter have been used to bolster output. Farmers in Northwest China were also incentivized to plant rapeseed in spring.

Other oil crops such as peanuts, flax, sesame and sunflower have been promoted across northern regions, Pan said.

He added that this year, the ministry aims to expand growing areas for soybean and oil crops by at least 660,000 hectares, and raise the self-sufficiency rate for cooking oil production by 1 percentage point.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the area planted with soybeans peaked at 12.73 million hectares in 1957. Cultivation of the crop started contracting in the 1990s after it was edged out by more lucrative cash crops such as corn.

China was the world's largest producer of soybeans until the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45), but now buys up to 60 percent of its needs on the global market.

The success in increasing oil crops was the result of an overall grain production push in the midst of the pandemic and numerous natural disasters.

Pan said grain output last year, which hit 686.5 million tons, was at an all-time high and had remained above the 650-million-ton benchmark set by central authorities for the eighth consecutive year.

"Unless you've experienced something in person, it's hard for you to truly understand the hardship involved," he said, citing a Chinese proverb.

Rainfall caused widespread disruption to the planting of crops harvested in the summer, and one-third of winter wheat was planted later than planned. Novel coronavirus outbreaks, droughts and insect plagues also complicated summer harvests, Pan said.

To ensure a bumper crop, grain-growing areas were expanded by 701,000 hectares last year, he said.

Some 40 billion yuan ($5.9 billion) was handed out to farmers as compensation for the lackluster price of rice and wheat. Another 17 billion yuan was earmarked to help with harvests in summer, he added.

CAAS, global partners cooperate to boost food security

By **LI LEI**

The Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences signed agreements with 19 global partners to share germplasm knowledge last year as part of a broader effort to bolster international collaboration in agricultural science and technology, CAAS President Wu Kongming said on Monday.

Wu told the academy's annual work conference in Beijing that it had reached deals with the partners to advance exchanges in the field of G2P, or genome to phenome studies, which helps researchers predict and improve the traits of important food strains.

In all, 121 international cooperation projects were finalized last year on that front, a 50 percent increase year-on-year, and 16 were listed among key national intergovernmental research and development programs, he said.

The increase in the sharing of the genetics of food species is part of a national effort to seek breakthroughs in germplasm to improve food security. Germplasm are genetic resources such as seeds or animal tissue that can be used to aid in the breeding of crops or livestock.

"CAAS has worked to ramp up scientific and technological cooperation more openly and actively over the past year," Wu said.

Last year also saw the creation of the CAAS-Food and Agriculture Organization Innovation Platform, which Wu said was one of the major moves the government made to implement the Global Development Initiative proposed in 2021.

The Global Agricultural Science and Technology Innovation Alliance championed by the academy, which is still undergoing a deliberation process by the China Association for Science and Technology, has received applications from 34 domestic and 21 foreign institutions looking to participate, Wu said.

Last year, CAAS also laid the groundwork for establishing the China-Africa Agricultural Science and Technology Innovation Alliance and advanced the construction of joint laboratories in Kazakhstan, Romania and Uruguay, all participants in the Belt and Road Initiative.

China has in recent years promoted the sharing of agricultural technology to bolster world food security.

At the sixth International Agricultural Research Conference in December, Wu called on nations to share agricultural technology to boost global food supplies hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and regional conflicts.

He added that some of China's quality species, such as hybrid rice, should be introduced to other countries to strengthen global food security.

Speaking on Monday, Wu said that CAAS' global influence has seen notable progress.

As many as 116 CAAS researchers hold positions in international organizations or agencies, and 358 researchers serve as editors at influential global academic journals.

CAAS has championed China's drive for breakthroughs in agricultural science and technology as the country grapples with limited arable land and water resources, and an aging farming population.

Data provided by CAAS showed that the number of academic papers written by its researchers jumped 30 percent over the last decade, while patents increased 92 percent over the same period.

Wu said the contribution rate of science and technology to agricultural production grew from 54.5 percent in 2012 to 61.5 in 2021, and the mechanization rate in crop planting and harvesting rose from 57 percent to 72 over the same period.

"The overall strength of Chinese agricultural science and technology has reached a world-class level, and the number of highly cited agricultural papers and patent applications by China is the highest in the world," he said.

At the annual central rural work conference in December, central authorities called for efforts to vigorously accelerate and promote the modernization of agriculture and rural areas.

Wu said CAAS will be guided by the goal of promoting self-reliance in agricultural science and technology, and will give its all to improve the overall efficiency of scientific and technological innovation, and strive to write a new chapter in the development of agricultural science.

FROM THE FRONT LINE | DELEGATE'S TALE

Dedication reinvigorates Chongqing community

By **TAN YINGZI** and **DENG RUI**
in Chongqing

A 53-year-old community worker in Chongqing has dedicated 20 years of her life to serving the people by resolving their issues and improving community governance, both of which express her determination and responsibility as a Party member.

Xie Lan, Party chief of Xingjiaqiao community in Chongqing's Liangjiang New Area, was born and raised in the community. Last year, she was elected as a delegate to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

She said that before she became a community worker in 2002, she worked in transportation and then at a shoe factory. As a result of her leadership skills, she was appointed staff director of her community in 2013.

Around 30 years ago, as the country began to urbanize rapidly, Xingjiaqiao was one of the first areas of the city to develop, as 1,422 farmers realized a long-held dream of becoming city dwellers.

With the passage of time, however, the community became dilapidated and unsafe — with tangles of cables on walls and strung across streets, leaky apartment ceilings caused by aging pipes in kitchens and bathrooms, and unstable walls.

"A total of 465 out of the community's 488 apartments in 16 buildings needed repairs," Xie said, as she flipped through photos of some of the cases she dealt with on her mobile phone. Once, a wall crumbled and fell, nearly hitting one of the residents.

"I had to stand under an umbrella while cooking or using the toilet," said resident Huang Yantao.

In 2017, the local government launched a free renovation and transformation project to tackle the problems. To the surprise of Xie and her colleagues, most of the residents took a negative attitude toward the project, unable to take the local government at its word.

Xie remained undaunted. "Leaders must work hard to solve problems and improve people's quality of life," she said. "I was not prepared to let the residents miss out on this valuable opportunity."

Knowing that the neighbors had heard rumors that their buildings were to be sold and pulled down for commercial use, the small but vigorous woman and her team began to visit residents home by home with official declarations to dispel rumors.

This is how she came about her nickname of the "nut-cracking director", for she was constantly resolving renovation disputes in the neighborhood.

Just as the situation was beginning to take a favorable turn, Xie was diagnosed with lung cancer in September 2018, but even so, the "iron woman" would not be defeated. She continued to work even as she received treatment, so determined was she to get the work done.

"Good community governance requires consideration and care," she said. To ensure clear and efficient communication with residents, the down-to-earth director set up a community troubleshooting session that was held from time to time.

Her sincerity, round-the-clock availability and somewhat "crazy" attitude gradually earned the trust of even the most cantankerous residents and support for the project rose from 23 percent to over 90 percent.

At the end of 2018, work began on the first cluster of residential buildings.

Xie underwent surgery in April 2019 and her cancer remains in remission.

In early 2020, residents were able to move back into their newly refurbished apartments, including Huang, who was prone to grumbling about his situation. He said he's extremely thankful now.

The beloved official is sometimes given herbal medicines, gathered in the mountains and made into tea by one of the residents, or is invited to a family get-together as a neighbor.

As stated in the report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC, benefiting the people is the fundamental purpose of governance and an essential part of the Party's commitment to serving the public good, Xie said.

"We must ensure and improve the people's well-being as we pursue development, and encourage everyone to work hard together to meet aspirations for a better life.

"There is a great deal of responsibility involved, but I love to work," she added, noting that great changes have taken place in Xinjiaqiao and that so far, renovations have begun on 887 residential and commercial spaces in 27 buildings, which will be completed in two phases. Eight buildings in the first phase will be finished in March, and the last phase of the old residential area — which involves 502 residential and 135 commercial spaces in 14 buildings — will be officially launched after the Chinese New Year.

Xie said that old buildings have been equipped with elevators. Last year, community Party members and residents worked to make a garden. Residents' lives and the environment are getting better.

"The community has many expectations," she said. "And it is our duty to try to meet them."

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Xie Lan (left), Party chief of Xingjiaqiao community in Chongqing's Liangjiang New Area, listens to the concerns of a resident.
PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Companies moved to take action on climate change

By **HOU LIQIANG**
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China will introduce more market mechanisms to encourage companies to accelerate their green, low-carbon transitions, according to the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.

In recent years, the ministry has announced a series of environmental protection policies to help guide and motivate a green economic transformation. The effects of these policies have materialized gradually, said Sun Shouliang, director of the ministry's comprehensive department, at a news conference on Tuesday.

Over the past three years, companies across the country that lowered their emission levels below national standards have enjoyed tax cuts worth over 13 billion yuan ($1.9 billion), he said.

The ministry has managed to incorporate 16 types of environmentally friendly projects, including carbon capture, use and storage, as well as nine types related to the comprehensive use of resources into the national catalog of programs in which enterprises can participate to receive tax cuts, he added.

In their efforts to build pilot zones to reform the green financing system, the ministry and other government bodies have listed 48 types of projects contributing to national climate targets as those that enjoy preferential financing policies.

Companies engaged in such projects may take advantage of preferential policies, he said.

Most are considered urgent tasks and will require more funding from companies to complete, he added.

China aims to reach peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060.

Sun highlighted the mandatory release of environmental information as an instrument the ministry plans to further tap.

As part of an effort to implement a national guideline on the mandatory release of environmental information, local authorities have specified 85,000 companies required to publish environmental impact data this year, he said.

"We are promoting the construction of a system for the mandatory release of environmental information, and the connection of that system to the National Credit Information Sharing Platform and the Basic Financial Credit Information Database," Sun said, adding that efforts will be accelerated.

He vowed to introduce more policies to accelerate green, low-carbon development. For example, efforts will be made to develop the mechanism for environmental credit ratings.

In another move to promote climate action, the ministry has made significant progress on carbon monitoring, according to Jiang Huohua, deputy director of the ministry's department of environmental monitoring.

The national urban greenhouse monitoring network has 116 stations, 26 of which are high-precision, he said.

He also noted progress in the ministry's pilot programs on carbon monitoring.

Operators of 66 thermal power generation units have voluntarily connected monitoring facilities to the ministry's network, making it possible to automatically obtain hourly emissions data, he said.

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CHINA

From left: Volunteers guide students in wearing rucksacks full of books to experience the feeling of being pregnant. A volunteer teaches children at a library in Qianlinzi village, Linyi city, Shandong province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

NGO teaches countryside children about the birds and the bees

Volunteers have been making efforts to raise awareness of the facts of life among youngsters in isolated rural areas. **Xin Wen** reports.

The development of sex education in China, especially its popularization in rural areas, is still at an early stage. That's because sex is often a taboo subject in the countryside, which is reflected in the fact that few people are willing to receive formal education about it.

In 2016, during her sophomore year at the Ewha Womans University in Seoul, South Korea, Tao Yichen, started focusing on sex education for rural children and launched a nonprofit project on the subject.

In 2017 and 2018, the native of Lishui city, Zhejiang province, selected 41 volunteers (mostly university students) from 100 applicants. Then, in the summers of 2018 and 2019, she led 20 of them to her hometown in Jinyun county to provide free optional two-week sex education courses for local children.

The volunteers — 30 women and 11 men — compiled an e-book, *The Childhood Patronus*, to illustrate the differences between male and female bodies, along with information about puppy love and self-protection for children ages 6 to 12.

The lessons were easily digestible because the teachers used games and cartoons, and they also employed slang and other terms favored by youngsters.

Tao said rural primary students need to learn about physiological changes and also to cultivate appropriate values, such as understanding that it is not shameful to mention menstruation. "It's like a seed sown in their hearts. In this way, I hope we can help more children learn about themselves and understand the world," the 26-year-old said.

Statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs show that by the end of 2020, there were about 6.43 million "left-behind children" — whose parents had moved away in search of work — in China's rural areas.

Lack of information

In July 2019, Dong Wenyu, a graduate law student at Shanghai Maritime University, spent three weeks as a volunteer teacher in a village in Lanzhou, Gansu province, providing sex education for primary students.

Despite being the only male teacher in the volunteer group, Dong said he didn't feel embarrassed teaching the subject. Instead, he put more emphasis on biology-related tuition when teaching students in grades three and four (ages 8 and 9).

"During chats with students after class, I found that their regular teachers hadn't taught them any relevant sex knowledge," the 24-year-old said.

Clockwise from top: Dong Wenyu delivers a lecture to local school students in Qianlinzi in August 2020. Children color in the private parts of the body during a lesson designed to teach them how to better protect themselves. Tao Yichen (right) teaches students at junior high school in August.

"For example, first and second grade students, who were ages 6 and 7, rarely understood what we were talking about in class but paid a lot of attention to the games we played.

"So, we only taught students in grades one and two about where we come from. Students in grades three and four could understand the ideas of where we come from and bodily structures but they had difficulty comprehending adolescence. The boys in the fifth or sixth grades tittered sneakily in class, laughing delightedly when I taught them the biological difference between men and women."

Dong sensed that while the students had no official channels to help them understand sexuality, they had their own ways of learning about it, and they laughed out loud at some of the facts. He also noticed that most of the students were confused by the concept of gender equality.

For example, when discussing the differences between men and women, Dong asked whether women could be police officers. "Some students said that girls can't become police officers," he recalled.

This made Dong think deeply about whether short-term volunteer teaching could help rural students gain a good understanding of gender equality. In subsequent classes, he gave more examples to help them understand the concept, such as asking if their mothers did most of the housework and whether their fathers ever helped with daily chores.

"They answered that their fathers might not be home often, but if they were at home they didn't do any housework," he said.

Dong believed that compared with giving a lecture on the different bodily structures of men and women, the concept was easier for the primary school students to accept as they were more willing to speak up and make points in class.

"And it (expressing views) is also an important part of education," he said.

Relationship reassessed

In August 2020, Xu Yinmin went to a library in Qianlinzi village in Linyi city, Shandong province, to provide primary school students with two-week sex education courses. The experience made him reassess his relationship with his own parents.

Xu's class discussed how babies are conceived, including how the sperm fuses with the egg to begin the fertilization process. Using cartoons, he explained the whole process of pregnancy by covering the condition of the expectant mother at three months, six months and just before birth.

"Our volunteers invited the students to wear rucksacks full of books on their fronts to simulate the feeling of being pregnant, enabling the children to feel how strenuous it is to carry a child (in the womb)," said Xu, who is now 24 and a math undergraduate at the University of Waterloo in Canada.

"In the game, the children often said the backpack was too heavy and that their waists were compressed. They said they were exhausted and that pregnancy is painful," he said.

"After, many started considering the mother's position more and asked what fathers can do to help during pregnancy."

Given the potential risk of sexual assault that left-behind children may face, the volunteers thought of a way to draw a body and allow the children to paint the private parts on the figure.

"We wanted to guide them to know that some parts are private, and if someone touches them, he or she is a bad person. Who might that person be? It may not be a stranger, but possibly even someone close to them," Xu said.

Help for residents

The voluntary teaching sessions undertaken by Xu and his seven peers also helped older residents.

Sun Jinxiu, who hails from a village in Linyi, has two sons. Her eldest boy, who is now 14, attended Xu's classes in 2020.

Sun was grateful to the volunteers because she had been worried that she might unwittingly confuse her children during discussions about puberty, so she had been afraid to discuss the issue with them face to face.

"My parents are illiterate, so I wasn't guided in the right direction when I was about 10. When my sons were 11 or 12 years old, I wanted them to be educated properly so they would understand the changes in their bodies and minds as they entered puberty," she said.

She appreciated the efforts made by the volunteer teaching team and hoped similar teachers would visit the village every year.

She said there were 3,700 households in the settlement and most families had at least one left-behind child. Because the parents didn't see their children for long periods, the grandparents became the primary caregivers but many neglected the children's development.

"Those kids lacked company, and they had difficulty communicating their feelings when they encountered new things," she said.

Tao, the initiator of the rural sex education program, said: "One single class taught by our volunteers can't fix the fundamental problems in rural sex education. However, I hope more people will be aware of the problems through this method and give more primary school students hope to face the future."

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FIRST PERSON

Real equality means girls don't need to be protected

Dong Wenyu, *24, postgraduate law student at Shanghai Maritime University*

I am my family's only child. Having been born in a small village in Huangshi, Hubei province, I sensed a traditional feeling there that every family should have a son.

The same strong feeling struck me again at Mapo village in Lanzhou, Gansu province, when I went there as a volunteer teacher.

I first noticed it during chats with the children after classes, and it was later confirmed by visits to their homes. Five or six families we visited had two or three children, while the other households had one girl and one boy.

During the visits, I noticed that in most cases the children were being cared for by their grandparents because their parents had gone to cities for work. The grandparents usually asked older girls to yield and let their young brothers take priority in using things.

However, at my primary school in Kunshan, Jiangsu province, girls were in a relatively advantageous position.

Until junior high school, girls were good at studying and many other things. I have never felt that boys are better than girls. Later, I realized that whether in a classroom or in society if a girl needs to be taken extra care of, it means that women themselves are in a relatively weak position because that's the only explanation of why she would need the care.

If women and men are completely equal, it stands to reason that the female side does not need extra care, which is the absolute equality we're talking about.

In my daily life, this situation rarely happens In most cases when women ask to be protected, as a man you need to show more humility to females, but that presupposes that the object of your consideration is weaker than you and therefore needs your protection.

I hope that through our voluntary teaching efforts in the rural areas, the status quo can be changed partly. I'm sure that more efforts will be made in the future to improve the situation.

Dong Wenyu spoke with Xin Wen.

Long-term advocate sees efforts paying off

By XIN WEN

Despite many ups and downs, Liu Wenli is still enthusiastic about the promotion of sex education.

She described the revised Law on the Protection of Minors, which took effect on June 1, 2021, as "big progress" in the field of education because it includes a provision that schools and preschools should provide age-appropriate education for minors, improving their awareness of protecting themselves and their ability to prevent sexual assault and harassment.

Liu, a professor at Beijing Normal University who has long advocated sex education for children, said she had waited 33 years to see the topic written into law, having first become involved in 1988.

She recalled the country's first foray into the subject via "adolescent education" in the 1980s, and the decision of the State Education Commission (the predecessor of the Ministry of Education) to include a chapter about adolescence education in textbooks for junior and senior high schools in August 1988.

"It was a historic moment and marked the rapid development of sex education in the late 1980s," she said. "But the burgeoning growth didn't last long and in the 2000s, it was left to civil society groups to make an effort to develop sex education among young people, with governments rarely participating."

Liu has been active for many years. In May 2007, she launched a school-based sex education program for Beijing's migrant children.

It operated for 15 years at Xingzhi Primary School in the southern district of Daxing as students received six years of sex education from grades one to six via the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.

After attending the classes, students in the higher grades could better understand the relationship between family and marriage, learned to communicate and negotiate, understood behavior associated with sexual abuse and knew how to protect themselves.

"Parents also found that the education could bring them and their children closer, and improve effective communication and interaction in the family," Liu said.

In 2007, she started writing and publishing 12 textbooks for students from grades one to six, featuring six concepts ranging from family and friends, gender and rights to sexuality and healthy behavior.

However, in 2019, the textbooks were removed from the shelves because some netizens questioned the content, saying it was unsuitable for primary school students.

The ban was a big blow for Liu. "I believe our textbooks helped lots of parents and families. I know that when some sexual harassment and assaults happened, our textbooks sold well. Now, I can only help such families via online webinars and social software as the books are no longer published," she said.

After the books were pulled, Liu and her team sought more government support and policy guidance.

She kept a close eye on guidelines and regulations laid down by ministries and departments at all levels.

She also worked with deputies of the National People's Congress and members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to submit proposals about sex education to the two sessions every year.

Her efforts eventually paid off. In September, 2021, the State Council, China's Cabinet, released a development guideline indicating that school-age children should receive sex education and noted that children's access to sexual health services needed to be significantly improved.

Meanwhile, in November, 2021, the Ministry of Education issued a guideline stating that sexual health education and prevention of sexual harassment should be included in textbooks for primary and secondary school students.

"I won't halt my work to further advocate the necessity of sex education for children, and I hope the next generation will see a more stable and safer environment in their lives," Liu said.

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WORLD

More strife in store for commuters in France

Protesters take to the streets against pension reforms in Marseille on Tuesday. DENIS THAUST / ZUMA PRESS WIRE

PARIS — France is to face severe public transport disruptions on Thursday, operators have warned, as workers join a nationwide strike against a widely unpopular pension reform plan.

The suggested changes, still to be debated in parliament, would raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 and increase contributions required for a full pension.

The industrial action across different sectors on Thursday will be the first time in 12 years that all of France's unions are united, since the age was increased from 60 to 62 then.

"It'll be a hellish Thursday," Transport Minister Clement Beaune told broadcaster France 2 on Tuesday, urging all those who could to work from home.

Paris public transport operator RATP warned services would be diminished, with three metro lines out of service, and 10 others only operating partially.

Only 1 in 3 to 1 in 5 high-speed TGV lines and only 1 in 10 local TER trains will be operating, the SNCF train operator said.

International traffic on the Eurostar and Thalys lines is set to be nearly normal, while the Lyria connection with Switzerland will be heavily disrupted and other international train connections will be entirely canceled.

Meanwhile, 1 in 5 flights to and from Paris' Orly Airport are set to be canceled.

Transport disruptions

The airport, which is located south of Paris and the city's second-largest, at this stage is the only one in the country where the strikes could lead to disruptions, a spokesperson for the DGAC aviation regulator said.

Most slow trains between cities would be halted.

Up to 70 percent of nursery and primary school teachers are also expected to refuse to work, the education ministry said.

Seven out of 10 teachers will be on strike in primary schools, the leading union SNUipp-FSU said on Tuesday, while other sectors from refineries to banks are also set to be on strike.

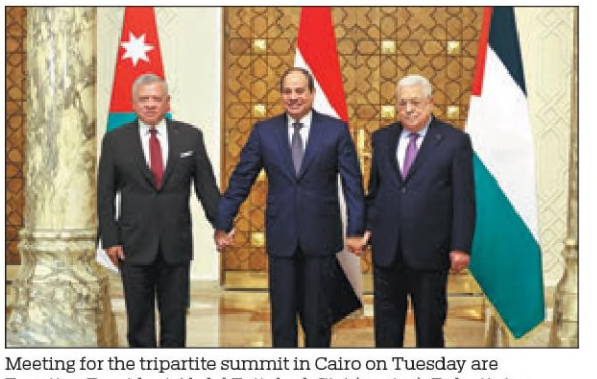
Opinion polls show that around two-thirds of French people oppose raising the retirement age, a move that comes amid high inflation and with the country still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

President Emmanuel Macron's last attempt at pension reform in 2019, aborted a year later when COVID-19 hit Europe, prompted the longest strike on the Paris transport network in three decades.

The 45-year-old centrist put the issue at the heart of his successful reelection campaign last year, pointing to forecasts that the system would fall into a heavy deficit at the end of the decade.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Rights of Palestinians underscored at summit


Meeting for the tripartite summit in Cairo on Tuesday are Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (center), Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (right) and the King of Jordan Abdullah II (left). PALESTINIAN PRESIDENCY / GETTY IMAGES

CAIRO — Leaders of Egypt, Jordan and Palestine highlighted on Tuesday the need to preserve "legitimate" Palestinian rights and continue joint efforts to achieve comprehensive, just and permanent peace in the region.

During a tripartite summit held in Egypt's capital Cairo, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, King Abdullah II of Jordan and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas discussed the Palestinian issue in light of the current developments in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The three leaders pledged to continue joint efforts to achieve a comprehensive peace based on the two-state solution, "which embodies an independent and sovereign Palestinian state on the borders of June 4, 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital" in accordance with international law, international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative, according to a statement by the Egyptian presidency.

They also stressed the need for the international community to provide protection for the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights, and confirmed the need to halt illegal unilateral Israeli measures that undermine the two-state solution and opportunities for achieving just and comprehensive peace.

These measures include "settlements, confiscation of Palestinian lands, demolitions of homes, the displacement of Palestinians from their homes, the continuous raids into Palestinian cities, and the violation of the historical and legal status in Jerusalem and its sanctities", the statement said.

They underlined the necessity to preserve the historical and legal status of Jerusalem and its Islamic and Christian sanctities, unify the Palestinians to end internal division and take effective measures to alleviate the deteriorating living conditions in the Gaza Strip.

The leaders also noted the importance of international support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East to continue to provide vital services for the refugees.

They agreed to continue intensive consultation within the Egyptian-Jordanian-Palestinian coordination framework at all levels to promote the resumption of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

Envoy summoned

In a separate development, Jordan summoned the Israeli ambassador to Amman on Tuesday to protest a move by the Israeli police to block the Jordanian envoy from entering the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. The incident quickly escalated tension between the neighbors.

Jordan's Foreign Ministry said its Ambassador to Israel Ghassan Majali was blocked from entering the compound, a holy site.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

Al-Aqsa Mosque, one of the region's most contested sites, could become a new major flashpoint between Israel and the Muslim world. Past Israeli actions there have triggered violent protests and wider conflicts.

XINHUA—AGENCIES

Fukushima plan worries spark appeal

With Japan edging closer to toxic water release, Pacific islands press for delay

SYDNEY — Pacific island nations are urging Japan to delay the planned release of contaminated wastewater from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean over fears fisheries will be contaminated, the Pacific Islands Forum, or PIF, said on Wednesday.

The Japanese government said last week that water from the Fukushima plant could be released into the sea "around this spring or summer", raising concerns from island nations still grappling with the legacy of nuclear testing decades ago.

In April 2021, Japan approved the future release of more than 1 million metric tons of water from the site into the ocean after treatment.

The forum, a regional bloc of 17 island nations, argues that the release of the water could have a major impact on fishing grounds that island economies rely on, and where up to half the world's tuna is sourced.

According to the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, PIF Secretary-General Henry Puna is backing the call from independent global experts who say they are not satisfied that the evidence provided so far is independent and verifiable.

"Our region is steadfast that there be no discharge until all parties verify it is safe," Puna said in a livestreamed seminar from Suva, Fiji.

In the meantime, Puna said the secretariat is still working closely with Japan and power company TEPCO on the issue.

"We're hoping to engage with them as soon as possible and the indications from Japan are that they are prepared to meet with us. It is absolutely important for the Pacific that Japan does not go ahead with the release," he said.

"We must prevent action that will lead or mislead us toward another major nuclear contamination disaster at the hands of others," said Puna, adding that Pacific islanders continue to endure the long-term impacts of the nuclear testing legacy on a daily basis.

The United States conducted nuclear testing in Pacific islands in the 1940s and 1950s and the Marshall Islands continues to campaign for more compensation from Washington over lasting health and environmental effects.

Ken Buesseler, a scientist with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, told the forum that a PIF scientific expert panel was urging Japan to reconsider the waste release because it was not supported by data and more information was needed.

Radioactivity moves across the ocean with currents and tides and risks contaminating fish, he said.

Japan's foreign ministry has said that regulators deemed it safe to release the water, which would be filtered to remove most isotopes but would still contain traces of tritium, an isotope of hydrogen hard to separate from water.

Public backlash

The discharge plan is also facing an angry backlash among the public, especially those in the fishing industry, who felt uneasy about the decision.

The dumping plan is suspected of violating the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter, as well as the 1996 protocol to the convention, Masahide Kimura, a member of a Japanese anti-nuclear campaign group, told Xinhua News Agency.

The plan also violates the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, as Japan's foreign ministry admitted that the area where the discharge would occur does not cover inland waters, Kimura said.

Kimura believes that the spreading of radioactive materials should not be allowed, as storage is the only means of prevention, and efforts should be prioritized to stop the inflow of groundwater and prevent the continued increase in the contaminated water.

"The opposition to the discharge of treated water into the ocean has not changed in the slightest," Masanobu Sakamoto, president of the National Fisheries Cooperative Federation of Japan, said in a statement on Friday. Sakamoto demanded a serious response from the government.

XINHUA—AGENCIES

Briefly

UKRAINE

Interior minister among those killed in crash

A helicopter crash in a Kyiv suburb on Wednesday killed 18 people, including Ukraine's interior minister and two children, Ukrainian authorities said. Interior Minister Denys Monastyrskyi, his deputy Yevhen Yenin and State Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Yurii Lubkovych were among those killed, said Ihor Klymenko, chief of Ukraine's National Police. Nine of those killed were aboard the emergency services helicopter that crashed in Brovary, an eastern suburb of the Ukrainian capital. There was no immediate word on whether the crash was an accident. A total of 22 people were injured, including 10 children.

AUSTRALIA

Qantas plane lands safely after mayday call

A Qantas flight traveling from New Zealand to Sydney landed safely on a single engine after it issued a mayday call over the Pacific Ocean on Wednesday. Qantas Flight 144 with 145 passengers aboard landed at Sydney Airport from Auckland, New Zealand, after a 3.5-hour flight between the neighboring nations' most populous cities. The Boeing 737-838 "experienced an issue" with one of its two engines about an hour from Sydney, a Qantas statement said. The mayday, which is issued when a flight is in grave and imminent danger and needs immediate assistance, was downgraded to a PAN-PAN, possible assistance needed, before the flight landed. Qantas said the pilot shut down the engine, but did not specify the problem.

FRANCE

World's oldest known person dies at 118

A French nun who was believed to be the world's oldest person has died a few weeks before her 119th birthday, the spokesperson for her nursing home in southern France said on Wednesday. Lucile Randon, known as Sister Andre, was born in the town of Ales in southern France on Feb 11, 1904. She was also one of the world's oldest COVID-19 survivors. Spokesman David Tavella said she died at 2 am on Tuesday at the Sainte-Catherine-Laboure nursing home in the town of Toulon. The Gerontology Research Group, which validates details of people thought to be 110 or older, listed her as the oldest known person in the world after the death of Japan's 119-year-old Kane Tanaka last year.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Spring Festival cheer roaring back in the Philippines

By **PRIME SARMIENTO** in Manila
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People get in a festive mood for the Year of the Rabbit outside a mall in Metro Manila on Monday. JAM STA ROSA / AFP

After nearly three years of subdued celebrations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese-Filipino community is looking forward to a more exuberant observance of this year's Spring Festival.

In Manila's Binondo district known as the city's Chinatown, the local community is busy decorating its streets with red lanterns, while stores are offering boxes of sweet *niangao* — known to most Filipinos as "tikoy", or sweet rice cake.

Wilson Lee Flores, honorary chairman of the Chinese-Filipino entrepreneur association Anvil Business Club, is expecting "more vibrant, more festive" Chinese New Year celebrations this year.

"The Philippines will join most of Asia in celebrating a more festive, joyous Chinese New Year. This is the happiest in three years," Flores said.

Such optimism also comes at a time when the Philippines and China have strengthened their bilateral ties, following the state visit of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr to Beijing earlier this month.

Marcos, who is in Switzerland this week to attend the World Economic Forum, has sent a video message to a New Year event held by the Chinese embassy in the Philippines. After wishing health and prosperity "for ourselves and our communities", Marcos said the Chinese New Year celebration can serve as "an opportunity to look into our cultural and historical richness as a people and to strengthen the ties that bind us as a nation".

"May we all write a new vibrant chapter, especially with our Filipino Chinese communities, in securing good fortune, joy and harmony," he said.

Philippine Vice-President Sara Duterte has likewise sent a video message, saying that she is looking forward to closer ties between the Philippines and China.

During the Chinese embassy's New Year event, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian stressed the need to "gear up the important consensus" forged during Marcos' Beijing visit to new heights, with both sides further promoting cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

"Deepening friendly cooperation is what our people long for," he said.

Centuries-long ties

The annual Chinese New Year celebrations in Manila reflect the centuries-long ties between China and the Philippines. As early as the 10th century, Chinese merchants sailed to the Philippines, bringing ceramics and silk in exchange for pearls and hemp fabric.

Chinese-Philippine trading did not stop even during the Spanish colonial era, with some of the merchants choosing to stay and marry Filipino women. In the 16th century, the Spaniards designated a settlement for Chinese immigrants now known as Binondo.

To this day, Binondo remains the center of Chinese-Filipino culture, home to restaurants that serve a fusion of Chinese and Filipino dishes, Chinese schools, the country's biggest Chinese-Filipino business association, and a museum on Chinese-Filipino heritage.

Lourdes Tanhueco Nepomuceno, director of the Confucius Institute at the University of the Philippines Diliman, pointed out that while Binondo remains the main venue for festivities, the New Year celebrations in the Philippines extend beyond the Chinese-Filipino community.

Aaron Jed Rabena, research fellow at the Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress in Manila, welcomes the return of Chinese tourists, noting that this will boost people-to-people exchanges and diplomatic ties.

"Personal touch really matters in diplomacy," Rabena said.

Austin Ong, research coordinator at the think tank Integrated Development Studies Institute, said that by traveling to the Philippines, Chinese visitors can "feel and experience" what the Philippines has to offer, and strengthen people-to-people relationships.

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WORLD

Brexit casting long shadow

Doubts swirl on UK's future, with research showing harm to economy

By **CHEN YINGQUN**
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Routines in Britain, as with these commuters in London on Monday, may appear little changed since Brexit. But businesses say they are pressured on many fronts. ANDY RAIN / EPA

Two years ago, the United Kingdom signed the Brexit trade deal and many expected a prosperous and dynamic future after the country completed its exit from the European Union. But now, doubts are swirling around Britain's future, with fresh research reinforcing a growing perception in the country that the withdrawal from the EU has caused huge damage to the economy.

The UK's economy is 5.5 percent smaller than it would have been if the country had stayed in the EU, the analysis by the think tank Centre for European Reform showed.

The referendum on whether the UK should go its own way took place in 2016, with about 52 percent voting in favor of leaving. After many twists and turns, the leaders of the EU and the UK agreed, at the end of 2020, on a trade deal called the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

But the UK's economic strains have grown in the meantime. Over the past year, high inflation and rising living costs have hit hard. The Bank of England forecast in November that the country was heading into a long recession. Moreover, in 2023, it is expected that only 33 percent of Britons will have enough money for essential spending, and only 5 percent will be able to spend freely.

The country has been in the grip of a wave of strikes, which started in the summer of 2022. Rail workers and nurses have been among those staging industrial action.

A recent poll published in the British newspaper The Independent said that 65 percent of British people now support a referendum on rejoining the EU, up from 55 percent a year ago.

Many said that Brexit has made the UK's economy worse and the country's global influence and ability to control its own borders have been weakened.

Jonathan Geldart, director-general of the Institute of Directors, said that Brexit has been difficult for many businesses.

"Our data shows that 60 percent of those who trade with the EU are finding Brexit challenging, with the main issues being the burden of administration and the loss of competitiveness against European firms," he said.

Hit particularly hard are those businesses that export so-called high-risk goods, such as agricultural products or products of animal origin. The customs processes for exporting such goods are complex, and the businesses sending them out can't afford to have their products — which need to stay fresh — held up at the border because of processing delays, he said.

Additionally, since freedom of movement between the two sides ended with the Brexit agreement, business travel has become a burden. Firms now often require work visas for employees, leading to a complex and expensive process that is hurting recruitment needs, Geldart said.

He said that larger businesses are finding it easier to adjust to Brexit, as they typically have more resources to help them cope with the burden compared with their smaller peers.

Border processes

"Some are establishing subsidiaries in the EU from which they export and import to avoid border processes. Many have hired new teams to look after the EU trade arm of their business," he said. "However, a significant minority (11 percent) have completely stopped trading with the EU altogether."

Kong Yuan, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of European Studies, said that as the EU's decision-making process is quite complicated, Brexit has enabled the UK to be quicker and more flexible in tackling global issues. But leaving the bloc has had a great negative impact on the UK's economy, with long-lasting effects.

"Getting away from the EU market invisibly drives up the cost of trade between Britain and the EU and has made Britain's economic growth slow even further," he said.

Kong said that over the past few years, British politics has been divided over the issue of Brexit, without an effective consensus. As a result, there have been frequent changes in the UK's leaders. Issues such as how to work together with the EU in the economic sector, and on the migrant crisis, will continue to divide the views of the UK government.

However, it is unlikely that the UK will have another referendum to rejoin the EU, and the UK has to seek connection with the bloc under the exit arrangements, he added.

Fraught departure from EU shrinks workforce

By **JULIAN SHEA** in London
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Almost 10 years after then-prime minister David Cameron first raised the prospect of a vote on Britain's membership of the European Union, new figures have revealed that Brexit has cost the country 1 percent of its workforce, causing a recruitment crisis and fueling wage growth at a time when the country is trying to tame inflation.

For many years, freedom of movement gave the British economy a supply of cheap EU labor. But with the Brexit agreement having ended that, the labor market is now feeling the pinch, with around 330,000 fewer workers available.

A study by the independent think tank Centre for European Reform highlighted the fluctuating numbers and changing face of the British labor market, which has been transformed and depleted.

By June, there had been a rise of 130,000 non-EU workers compared to a situation where post-Brexit immigration controls were unaltered, but this was offset by 460,000 fewer EU workers.

"The conditions of the new system, while liberal, are too onerous to compensate for the loss of free movement in low-skilled sectors of the economy, which has led to labor shortages," the study's authors, economists John Springford and Jonathan Portes, said. "Some combination of higher wages and prices and less output is likely, especially in work that is hard to automate."

Annual inflation rose 10.5 percent in the year through December, down from 10.7 percent the previous month, the Office for National Statistics said on Wednesday. Inflation peaked at a 41-year high of 11.1 percent in October.

UK inflation began soaring last year amid sharp price rises worldwide due to supply constraints, partially due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The fallout from Brexit has also increased the cost of doing business across a range of sectors.

Official data on Tuesday revealed that average British wages sank 2.6 percent at the end of last year.

The end of January also marks the third anniversary of the United Kingdom formally leaving the EU, and entering a yearlong withdrawal period of negotiations. The toll has been felt differently in different industries, with sectors such as agriculture, construction and hospitality particularly hard hit.

A report in Construction News published in January 2021 said the number of EU-born workers in the industry dropped by more than 25 percent from the third quarter of 2019 to the third quarter of 2020, a situation subsequently made worse by people changing working habits and even careers altogether during the pandemic.

Blow to agriculture

Agriculture has also been dealt a devastating blow. In 2017, the National Farmers Union told Parliament that almost all of the 70,000 fruit and vegetable-harvesting seasonal workers employed in the UK were from Eastern Europe. And in 2018, the Migration Advisory Committee said 99 percent of seasonal agricultural workers were from the EU.

"Restricting free movement has had a devastating impact, but not just on horticulture or agriculture, on pretty much every sector where people (come) from abroad," vegetable farmer Julian Marks told Euronews in October 2021.

A December report in The New York Times on London's restaurant scene noted that around 11 percent of jobs in Britain's hospitality industry are vacant, compared to 4 percent across the wider economy, a situation it said was "almost wholly a result of Brexit".

Agencies contributed to this story.

Wave of tech layoffs continues as Microsoft will cut 10,000 jobs

By **AI HEPING**
and **HENG WEILI** in New York

Layoffs are planned at Microsoft, whose headquarters in Redmond, Washington, are pictured on Wednesday. MATT MILLS MCKNIGHT / REUTERS

Microsoft will cut 10,000 jobs, the company announced on Wednesday, joining other global tech giants who also have laid off thousands.

CEO Satya Nadella said the software giant also would be taking a $1.2 billion charge in its upcoming earnings report, related to severance costs. It is set to report quarterly results on Jan 24.

In a note to employees, Nadella attempted to address the divergent outlook for different parts of the business.

Customers wanted to "optimize their digital spend to do more with less" and "exercise caution as some parts of the world are in a recession and other parts are anticipating one", he said. "At the same time, the next major wave of computing is being born with advances in AI."

Nadella said the layoffs, affecting less than 5 percent of Microsoft's workforce, would conclude by the end of March, with notifications beginning Wednesday.

Microsoft is laying off 878 full-time workers at its Redmond headquarters, according to an update on Washington state's Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification page. Under US law, most employers are required to report staff cuts affecting 50 or more workers at a single location.

The company has seen declining growth in its cloud business and also slumping sales of PCs.

"It was a rip-the-Band-Aid-off moment from Nadella and Microsoft, and we're seeing it across tech," Wedbush analyst Dan Ives told Yahoo Finance Live. "These companies were spending like 1980's rock stars at a pace that was unsustainable."

The Wall Street Journal reported that inside Microsoft, headquartered in Redmond, Washington, some employees were frustrated that the CEO was attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, as the layoffs were announced.

Last year, Microsoft cut 1 percent of its workforce, or about 2,000 jobs. The company also has eliminated open positions and halted hiring.

Microsoft had 221,000 full-time employees as of June 30 last year. Some 122,000 of those were in the United States; 99,000 were in other areas of the world.

"Here's one of the marquee growth companies with a very distinct user base saying that perhaps economic conditions aren't nearly as good as we thought they were," said Brian Frank, a portfolio manager at Frank Funds who has owned Microsoft stock on and off over the last several years.

Earlier this month, though, Nadella warned of turbulence in the tech sector, telling India's TV 8: "The next two years are probably going to be the most challenging. We did have a lot of acceleration during the pandemic, and there's some amount of normalization of that demand. And on top of it, there is a real recession in large parts of the world. We will have to adjust."

Amazon, Meta and Salesforce top tracking site Layoffs' lists with about 18,000, 11,000 and 8,000 staffers laid off, respectively, between November 2022 and January 2023.

In an internal memo seen by Reuters, Amazon said that affected workers in the United States, Canada and Costa Rica would be informed by the end of the day. Employees in China will be notified after the Chinese New Year.

The job cuts at Amazon primarily affected those in corporate roles, including in the company's Devices and Books businesses and human resources department, according to Business Insider. Meta cut positions across the company, including its Reality Labs division overseeing metaverse initiatives, Insider reported.

On an average, about 1,600 workers have gotten the pink slip every day in 2023 so far, according to Layoffs.

Globally, 91 tech companies already have laid off 24,151 workers just 15 days into 2023, according to Layoffs. That is about 15 percent of the 154,256 workers who were laid off by more than 1,000 tech companies in 2022.

"We haven't seen this activity since the dot-com bust," said Andrew Challenger, senior vice-president at outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Job cuts also have hit Wall Street.

Last week, Goldman Sachs started laying off 3,000 employees globally as dealmaking slows. Goldman Sachs reported Tuesday that fourth-quarter profit plunged 66 percent from a year ago.

Black Rock, the world's largest asset management firm, is also slashing up to 500 roles for the first time in four years.

Agencies contributed to this story.

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Energy report: China's reopening could spur global demand for oil

By **MINLU ZHANG** in New York
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China's lifting of COVID-19 restrictions is expected to boost global oil demand this year to a new record high, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said Wednesday.

The energy watchdog forecasts that global oil demand is set to rise by 1.9 million barrels a day, to a record 101.7 million barrels daily in 2023, with nearly half the gain from China following its lifting of COVID restrictions.

"China will drive nearly half this global demand growth even as the shape and speed of its reopening remains uncertain," the agency said in its monthly report.

In its report, the IEA said "a faster than anticipated reopening of China" and a "improved economic outlook" as well as lower oil prices for the upward revisions to its oil-demand forecasts, according to The Wall Street Journal. The agency raised its forecast for Chinese demand by 100,000 barrels a day to 15.9 million barrels a day.

As international travel recovers, jet fuel remains the largest source of growth, accounting for almost half of this year's increase in oil demand, according to the IEA. Demand for jet fuels and kerosene, both of which are used as aviation fuels, is expected to rise by 850,000 barrels a day this year, following a similarly strong 2022, the Journal reported.

By Jan 10, China had resumed 563 international flights, 6 percent of the pre-pandemic amount. It is expected that there will be 1,000 international flights on a weekly basis by the end of February and a faster recovery in the second half of this year, according to data shared with media from the Chinese Consulate General in New York.

> "The return of China's consumption engines is enormous for the oil market outlook."
> **Stephen Innes**, managing partner at SPI Asset Management

Oil prices rose about 1 percent on Wednesday to their highest intraday levels since early December after the IEA's forecasts and traders' optimism in China's economic recovery.

In the last quarter of 2022, mild weather and weak industrial activity helped cut oil demand by nearly a million barrels per day in developed countries, the report said.

But despite the fear of likely mild recessions in Europe and the US, China's reopening is set to fuel a rebound in nearby Asian economies and see it take the lead from India as the world's leader in oil-demand growth, Reuters reported.

"The return of China's consumption engines is enormous for the oil market outlook," said Stephen Innes, managing partner at SPI Asset Management, in a market update. "While the industrial engine is revving up, guzzling down oil products, consumers will soon catch up at the petrol pump.

"Crucially, the accumulation of household savings is massive and has risen fast over the past three years. Ultimately, when Chinese consumers start spending, it will boost oil prices," he added.

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BUSINESS

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Expert: China to see steady industrial output

By MA SI
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China has the confidence, ability and determination to cope with multiple challenges and maintain stable industrial growth this year, the country's top industry regulator said on Wednesday.

The comment comes after China's rebounding industrial production continued to play its "cornerstone" role in enhancing economic growth in 2022, with industrial output, a key economic indicator, rising 3.6 percent year-on-year last year.

Tian Yulong, chief engineer at the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, said at a news conference that hard work remains ahead to maintain stable industrial operations, especially in the current quarter.

> We insist on taking high-quality development as our primary task ..."
>
> **Tian Yulong,** chief engineer at the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology

"But with the optimized COVID-19 containment measures and the combined effects of existing and new policies to support businesses, we have the confidence, determination and ability to cope with difficult challenges," Tian said.

Last year, China's sprawling industrial economy played an effective role as a cornerstone and contributed to 36 percent of GDP growth. Notably, manufacturing investment increased by 9.1 percent year-on-year, showcasing better market expectations.

High-tech manufacturing and equipment production output soared by 7.4 percent and 5.6 percent, respectively, which was 3.8 percentage points and 2 percentage points faster than overall industrial output growth.

"We insist on taking high-quality development as our primary task, focus on promoting structural adjustment, transformation and upgrading, and accelerate the development of high-end, intelligent and green manufacturing," Tian said.

He added that the ministry is studying the follow-up support policies for new energy vehicles, such as promoting the development of fuel-cell vehicles and launching pilot cities in promoting comprehensive electrification of vehicles in public areas.

Last year, production volume and sales of new energy vehicles hit 7 million units and 6.9 million units, respectively, up 97 percent and 93 percent year-on-year, placing China tops worldwide for eight consecutive years, the ministry said.

Chen Shihua, deputy secretary-general of the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers, said January-February NEV sales may fall compared with the same period last year because of the withdrawal of subsidies that were first introduced in 2009.

But for the entire year, sales will maintain rapid growth, said Chen, as both the macroeconomy and consumer confidence continue to recover.

The China Passenger Car Association expects sales of electric and plug-in hybrid passenger vehicles to hit 8.5 million units in China this year.

Zhao Wei, chief analyst with Sinolink Securities, said despite all the challenges, industrial production beat expectations last year. And in 2023, the recovery of manufacturing investment will continue to be a driver of economic growth.

Wei Qijia, head of industry economy research at the State Information Center, said manufacturing is important to China's economic growth. It is necessary to combine the expansion of domestic demand with the stabilization of external demand, so as to better overcome challenges.

New energy vehicles are lined up at a carmaker's yard in Wuhu, Anhui province. WANG YUSHI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Potential homebuyers assess a property model in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia autonomous region.
LIU WENHUA / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Growth to pick up speed from 2nd qtr

HSBC: Recovery key macro theme for 2023, 2024; GDP may swell by 5%, 5.8%

By JIANG XUEQING
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China is intensifying efforts to consolidate and build on the ongoing economic recovery and will likely see the rebound accelerating from the second quarter of this year, economists said.

"China will emerge from COVID-19 and rebound strongly from the second quarter," said Liu Jing, an economist at HSBC.

Economic rebound will be a key macro theme for China throughout 2023 and 2024. China's GDP will grow 5 percent this year and 5.8 percent next year, if current forecasts pan out as expected, HSBC said.

"Consumption has been a laggard so far but a recovery to the pre-pandemic growth level of 8 percent is expected in 2023. We expect to see strong pent-up demand for activities and consumption, which previously faced restrictions. The economic recovery should boost incomes and improve the consumption outlook, while households can also draw on the 6.6 trillion yuan ($974.7 billion) in excess savings accrued over the past three years," Liu said.

After the important policy pivot in November, several measures have been rolled out at the central government level to channel funding to property developers, while local governments are lifting purchase restrictions to stimulate demand. Once China emerges from COVID-19, the impact of this policy support will be visible, and a modest rebound in the housing sector is expected in 2023, she said.

Liu Linan, managing director and head of China macro strategy at Deutsche Bank, said: "This year is the first year of China's 'reopening' (after three years of COVID-related restrictions). We believe the steadiness and pace of economic growth will further pick up next year."

The relaxation of COVID-19 control measures and adjustments to real estate policies are essential to ensure that China's economic growth will return to normal. There is still room to further adjust mortgage rates and down payments for first-time homebuyers, said Liu Linan.

"If further progress is made in terms of consolidation of China's real estate sector, property developers' debt restructuring and bank loans for acquisitions of quality property projects, it will be conducive to boosting recovery of the sector and restoring market confidence," she said.

In order to bolster the economy, China's central bank may cut the reserve requirement ratio for banks once or twice this year. It is also expected to use structural monetary policy instruments to support China's medium- and long-term development strategies, such as technological innovation and green development, and help small and medium-sized enterprises improve their employment and business conditions, she said.

Yu Xiangrong, China chief economist at Citigroup, said with the release of COVID-19 restrictions and the opening of a fresh policy cycle, the Chinese economy will look forward to a new start in 2023.

Citi economists predicted China's GDP, led by domestic demand, will achieve a natural recovery and grow 5.3 percent this year. The driving force for growth will mainly come from two aspects.

First, the catch-up effect of consumption and the services sector. If the pandemic situation stabilizes, consumption and services will recover substantially beginning in the second quarter. The excess savings accumulated by China's household sector during the pandemic will gradually be converted into purchasing power after reopening, Yu said.

Second is property stabilization. Policies supportive of real estate have continued to increase or see accelerated implementation. Once the COVID-19 situation stabilizes, new and old policy measures will have a positive bearing on property sales and investment. This is a necessary condition for stabilizing growth and investment, he said.

Darius Tang, associate director of corporates at Fitch Bohua, a wholly owned subsidiary of Fitch Ratings, said infrastructure investment and consumption are key if China is to achieve the goal of stable growth.

Boosting consumer confidence and stimulating spending will be the highlights of the government's work plan this year, and consumption is the most important factor that will determine the path of China's economic recovery in 2023, Tang said.

The easing of COVID-19 control measures will have positive significance in terms of raising the consumption expectations or enriching the consumption scenarios, he said.

Specialists eye more stable capital flows

By ZHOU LANXU
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China's cross-border capital flows are expected to become more stable this year following a "generally balanced" situation last year, officials and experts said on Wednesday.

Underpinning their forecast is a rallying Chinese economy that may drive foreign inflows into onshore securities and support the country's trade surplus and foreign direct investment, they said.

They commented after official data showed that China had registered a full-year foreign exchange settlement surplus and rising foreign holdings in Chinese securities at the end of last year, bucking the headwinds brought by global monetary tightening.

The country's foreign exchange settlement and sales by banks came in at $2.57 trillion and $2.46 trillion last year, respectively, indicating a surplus of $107.3 billion, the State Administration of Foreign Exchange said on Wednesday.

China's cross-border receipts and payments by nonbanking sectors also registered a surplus in 2022, with the amount of receipts surpassing payments by $76.3 billion, according to SAFE.

Wang Chunying, deputy head and spokeswoman of SAFE, said the figures have indicated "generally balanced" cross-border capital flows last year, which will become more stable this year as China may become the world's only major economy to see a rally in economic growth.

Specifically, the country's securities markets are expected to attract steady foreign investments as economic growth recovers, Wang said.

SAFE data showed that overseas holdings in onshore bonds increased by a net $7.3 billion in December while those in onshore stocks rose by $8.4 billion.

The recovery in foreign investments has continued in the new year, with foreign investors registering a net purchase of onshore stocks and bonds worth about $12.6 billion in the first half of January, according to the administration.

Mike Shiao, Invesco's chief investment officer of Asia excluding Japan, said the global investment management company anticipates a further upside in the Chinese economy and decent company earnings recovery this year.

"China's GDP growth will likely reach mid-single digits in 2023 due to the surge in domestic demand," Shiao said.

Wang also said China's trade in goods and FDI are likely to continue to register a surplus this year as the country's foundation of supply chain stability will become more solid upon optimized COVID response.

China's FDI, in actual use, hit $189.13 billion last year, up 8 percent year-on-year, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

SAFE data also showed that renminbi receipts and payments accounted for nearly half of the country's cross-border payments in 2022, up by more than 20 percentage points from the level seen in 2016.

Onshore foreign exchange deposits of enterprises, individuals and other market entities stood at $639.6 billion by the end of November, down by $56.2 billion compared with the end of 2021, according to the administration.

Briefly

China cuts gasoline, diesel retail prices

China cut retail prices for gasoline and diesel on Wednesday, based on recent trends in global crude prices. Gasoline and diesel prices will fall by 205 yuan ($30) per metric ton and 195 yuan per ton, respectively, said the National Development and Reform Commission.

New HSR underway to aid Xiong'an New Area

Construction of the Xiong'an-Shangqiu section of the 639-kilometer Beijing-Xiong'an-Shangqiu high-speed railway is underway smoothly. The section will extend for 552 km with 16 stations, allowing trains to run at 350 kilometers per hour. It will help boost the development of the Xiong'an New Area. One of the builders, China Railway No 4 Engineering Group Co Ltd, said its project department has set up an integrated center overseeing its mixing plants, reinforcing bar processing, work safety and labor management to build the HSR into a top-quality line.

XINHUA - CHINA DAILY

Officials sanguine on year's outlook, momentum

By OUYANG SHIJIA
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China has favorable conditions and the capability to maintain robust economic growth in 2023 despite headwinds, according to officials and experts.

Even though China is facing multiple pressures from shrinking demand, supply shocks, weakening expectations as well as a complicated and grim external environment, the country has the confidence, capabilities and conditions to achieve an overall recovery and improvement in its economic performance, said Yuan Da, director of the Department of National Economy at the National Development and Reform Commission.

Yuan said at a news conference in Beijing on Wednesday that economic fundamentals that will sustain long-term growth remain unchanged, and the country has witnessed increasing positive factors behind the recovery.

"The pent-up consumption demand will gradually recover with the optimized COVID-19 measures taking effect, which will strongly boost growth. And effective investment will bring about rapid growth given the high-end, intelligent and green development of traditional industries, blossoming strategic emerging industries and the addressing of weak links," he said.

Jin Xiandong, director of the NDRC's Office of Policy Studies, said that China is gradually returning to normalcy in terms of life and production performance, as the country has passed its peak of COVID-19 infections.

So far, China's 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities on the mainland have set their growth targets for this year, mapping out economic blueprints for a robust 2023. Among them, 29 regions are targeting around 5 percent or even higher growth this year.

Looking ahead, Jin highlighted the importance of "new infrastructure" construction, saying that serves as a key engine for stabilizing investment, improving people's living standards and shoring up growth.

A batch of investments will be allocated from the central budget around Spring Festival to support construction of major "new infrastructure" projects. Notably, the country will strongly increase spending on developing information networks in remote central and western regions to address weak links, Jin added.

Luo Guosan, director of the NDRC's Department of Fixed Asset Investment, said expanding effective investment will help boost domestic demand, deal with unforeseen factors and maintain economic performance within a reasonable range.

Luo pledged more efforts to speed up the construction of major projects in fields like transportation, energy and water conservancy as well as increase support for manufacturing and private sector investment.

Their remarks came after data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed on Tuesday that China's economy expanded 3 percent last year. The figure is higher than the growth rates of the world's major economies, with less than 2 percent anticipated for both the United States and Japan and 1.9 percent recorded in Germany.

According to the NBS, the country's GDP in 2022 reached 121.02 trillion yuan ($18 trillion), an increase of about 6.1 trillion yuan.

During the past three years, China's economy expanded at an average annual growth rate of around 4.5 percent, higher than the average growth pace of the global economy, said Guo Liyan, director of the Comprehensive Situation Research Office of the Academy of Macroeconomic Research, which is part of the NDRC.

Guo said China's economy will continue to rebound in 2023, fueled mainly by a recovery in domestic demand, including both consumption and investment.

Guo's views were echoed by Zhou Maohua, an analyst at China Everbright Bank, who said consumption will boost growth this year.

Citing the growth targets set by 31 provincial-level regions, Zhou said China's GDP growth rate will likely be in the range of around 5 percent to 6 percent this year.

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BUSINESS

An employee supervises packaging at a drug firm's production unit in Shenyang, Liaoning province, on Jan 12. ZHANG WENKUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Drugmakers, govt units at full throttle to meet demand

Integrated efforts seen boosting output and supply of key COVID medicines

By **LIU ZHIHUA**
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With the nation constantly optimizing COVID-19 prevention measures, drugmakers in China are ramping up production and distribution to help in the recovery from COVID impacts as quickly as possible to answer the government's call to ensure anti-epidemic medical supplies amid soaring demand.

Experts and business leaders said such efforts have played a key role in maintaining steady socio-economic development and demonstrate China's unparalleled capabilities in manufacturing, which is characterized by its huge scale, completeness and high efficiency of related industrial and supply chains.

Since the optimization of COVID-19 measures in China, soaring demand for medicines treating related symptoms like fevers and coughing has prompted more than 200 relevant subsidiary pharmaceutical companies of China National Pharmaceutical Group Co Ltd, or Sinopharm, to operate in full swing to triple the capacity of making key medicines.

In less than a month, they produced more than 228 million packs of various anti-coronavirus drugs, including 19.03 million packs of fever, cough and antibiotic medicines like ibuprofen, acetaminophen and cefixime.

Wang Jiangping, vice-minister of industry and information technology, said in late December that the domestic daily production capacity and production volume of ibuprofen and paracetamol rose to 202 million tablets and 190 million tablets, respectively.

The daily production capacity and production volume of the two drugs were four times higher compared with levels seen in early December, Wang said.

"China has a complete industrial chain and a large-scale pharmaceutical industry. It is not a question of whether China can produce drugs like ibuprofen but if it can produce them in a highly efficient manner even when facing production disruptions and the demand surge due to the epidemic," said Bai Ming, deputy director of international market research at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in Beijing.

"As long as the parties concerned are well coordinated, China's industrial and supply chain advantages will be unleashed to raise production efficiency and better meet market demand," he said.

Alan Chen, general manager of Beaufour-Ipsen (Tianjin) Pharmaceutical Co, said thanks to the help and coordination from local governments, the company can maintain high-level capacity to meet soaring demand for its flagship anti-diarrheal medicine during the latest COVID-related buying spree.

The company has adjusted production lines to optimize efficiency and employees work in three shifts to ensure around-the-clock production. Its current output of anti-diarrheal medicine has risen to around 10,000 packs a day, up from 7,000 packs per day in the past.

"The recent demand spike was a surprise. We usually keep an additional stockpile of about one to two months' sales volume for emergency use and that stockpile ran out in just two weeks," Chen said.

"Thanks to joint efforts from everyone, we have managed to meet demand while avoiding pushing our employees to exhaustion," he added.

He also spoke highly of China's efficient pharmaceutical retail and distribution channels.

"In China, there are hundreds of thousands of pharmacies selling our products, which helps to ensure stable supplies of our medicines to patients," he said.

Sinopharm said it distributed 274 million packs of fever, cough, antiviral and antibiotic medicines nationwide in December, leveraging on its 614 medical logistics hubs across the country.

The company also produced 59.46 million packs of Chinese patented medicine for COVID-19 treatment, 42.58 million packs of Chinese patented preventatives, 90 million packs of Chinese medicine in granule form for COVID-19 prevention, and 17.50 million bags of prepared traditional Chinese medicine tablets in December.

Services sector on good track to development

By **LIU YUKUN**
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China's services sector is expected to see strong growth momentum this year after renewed hustle and bustle is seen reviving the consumer market amid policies to optimize COVID-19 controls and stabilize the economy, officials and experts said on Wednesday.

Li Suoqiang, an official with the National Bureau of Statistics, said that since mid-December to late-December, passenger flows recorded in major business clusters have increased significantly and inter-provincial and long-distance travel demand has increased.

During the New Year's Day holiday, more than 2.13 billion parcels were delivered. Among them, collection and delivery of parcels increased 15.2 percent and 11.5 percent year-on-year, respectively, Li said.

Cinema box office sales during the holiday exceeded 550 million yuan ($81.3 million), and the operating rate of theaters nationwide reached 85 percent, a record high in 10 months, Li added.

Since January, urban passenger transport volume has picked up significantly. The Ministry of Transport predicted that passenger flow during the upcoming Spring Festival travel rush will exceed 2 billion, which is expected to be double that of the previous year, he said.

Wang Wei, head of the Market Economy Research Institute at the Development Research Center of the State Council, said that the expanding consumption of services will become the largest source of consumption growth.

Wang said that the consumption of services in areas like cultural tourism, elder care, child care, medical education, sports and leisure will become a key driver of consumption growth, and the growth rate of services consumption will continue to surpass that of commodity consumption.

It is estimated that at the end of the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-25) or in the early stage of the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-30), the proportion of residents' services consumption is expected to rise to 50 percent, making it an important driving force that supports consumption growth, Wang said.

Zhou Mi, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, said innovation was key to driving China's services sector development. "Online services saw rapid growth, though the pandemic dealt a blow to the consumer market. With the optimization of COVID-19 control measures, demand for offline services will gradually pick up and companies need to discover new business growth points for further development."

> "With the optimization of COVID-19 control measures, demand for offline services will gradually pick up and companies need to discover new business growth points for further development."
>
> **Zhou Mi,** senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation

The remarks followed a rebound in the services sector last year despite COVID-19 challenges, with the role of new growth drivers becoming more prominent.

In 2022, the added value of the services industry was nearly 63.9 trillion yuan, an increase of 2.3 percent over the previous year. The added value of the services industry accounted for 52.8 percent of the GDP, 12.9 percentage points higher than that of the secondary industry. The contribution rate of the services industry to national economic growth was 41.8 percent, driving GDP growth by 1.3 percentage points, according to the NBS.

New growth drivers have played a leading role in the development of the services sector. Last year, the added value of the industry of information transmission, software and information technology services, as well as the finance industry, increased by 9.1 percent and 5.6 percent year-on-year, respectively, driving the added value growth of the services sector by 1.5 percentage points, the NBS said.

Li said that investment in the services industry continued to expand last year. The fixed asset investment in the services industry increased by 3 percent over the previous year, and the growth rate was 0.9 percentage point higher than the previous year. Among the various fields, fixed asset investment in health care services saw a rapid growth of 27.3 percent over the previous year.

Trade in services maintained rapid growth. From January to November, the total import and export volume of services trade was more than 5.4 trillion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 15.6 percent. Among them, services exports were about 2.58 trillion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 15.5 percent. Services imports reached 2.82 trillion yuan, a year-on-year rise of 15.6 percent.

Industrial park in Beijing crucial link between German and Chinese firms

By **LIU YUKUN** and **DU JUAN**

At a factory in Shunyi district, Beijing, employees are busy working on nine production lines to prepare for the annual peak of water pump orders.

"Production and operations are now back on track with a 100 percent on-duty rate, thanks to government support," said Rong Guang, director of government and public affairs of Wilo Group.

"Going forward, China will become another major market for Wilo. The performance of Wilo China will enhance the group's confidence in the market, leading to more investment and business in the country," Rong said.

He said the company's businesses were on a steady track despite COVID-19 challenges. Wilo Group is a Germany-based pump and pump systems manufacturer for water supply and air conditioning technology.

Backed by satisfaction with market performance and supportive policies, foreign companies in Beijing are accelerating the resumption of work and production with a majority running at full capacity, showing their strong confidence in business development this year, according to the Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform.

Rong said: "Although the COVID-19 pandemic brought certain difficulties in production and operations, the company went through the challenges with the support from governments at all levels.

"The Shunyi district government officials helped us to coordinate permits to use trucks, ensuring smooth factory production. The China-Germany Industrial Park, where our company is based, helped us obtain COVID-19 antigen tests."

The China-Germany Industrial Park is a major facility built with the aim of promoting cooperation between Chinese and German companies.

In December, the industrial park sent a team to Germany and established ties with over 20 companies in the European country.

Hao Lijie, deputy director of the industrial park's management committee, said many German companies have shown interest in visiting the China-Germany Industrial Park and expressed willingness to cooperate.

"It has laid a good foundation to deepen exchanges. The industrial park will actively expand its influence in Germany and explore more new opportunities for industrial cooperation between the two countries," Hao said.

Currently, the industrial park has promoted 40 China-Germany cooperation projects, with another 24 projects under discussion. It has also attracted more than 90 German companies, whose annual output surpassed 30 billion yuan ($4.4 billion) last year.

Medical equipment manufacturer Drager is located in the industrial park. It vowed to actively promote research and development and production in Beijing to better serve Chinese customers.

Drager's orders in 2021 totaled 460 million yuan, a year-on-year growth of 25 percent. Net sales reached 420 million yuan, up 12 percent from the previous year.

Beijing's advantages in high-end industries, the concentrated settlement of foreign firms' headquarters and R&D centers, and its opening-up policies and good business environment are all key factors attracting foreign players to invest in the city, according to the commission.

Employees work at Drager's production facility in Beijing on Jan 4. WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY

From January to November 2022, the capital city utilized $17.23 billion of foreign capital, an increase of 14.6 percent year-on-year, the commission said.

With optimized COVID-19 control measures, more foreign firms said they are bullish on this year's market performance.

France-based medical care company Sanofi said it will continue to expand its Beijing factory to enhance local production capacity and plans to introduce at least 20 innovative products to China by 2025.

In the first three quarters of 2022, Sanofi's revenue in China reached $2.3 billion, up 8.5 percent year-on-year.

Schneider Electric's factory in the Beijing Economic-Technological Development Area has also resumed production with 95 percent of workers on duty. It has completed the R&D of new-generation products and vowed to build a workshop producing core parts this year.

Going forward, the city will continue to attract more foreign-invested projects, with a focus on areas such as low-carbon development and the digital economy, the commission said.

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BUSINESSFOCUS

Shopping galas prove effective for recovery

Nation's buying power ramped up amid optimization of COVID-19 measures

By **FAN FEIFEI**
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Wang Zhen, 28, a white-collar worker in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, just placed an order online with her mobile phone. Gift boxes of protein powder, multivitamins, mineral tablets and nutrition supplements like wolfberry honey and collagen will be delivered to her home in the next few days.

"I bought these commodities as Chinese New Year presents for my parents. I will go back to my hometown in Changsha, Hunan province, during the upcoming Spring Festival holiday this year for a family reunion," Wang said.

"My parents were infected with COVID-19 a month ago and recovered after taking medicine. I hope the nutritional goods will boost their immunity."

Apart from health-related products, she also purchased a robotic vacuum cleaner and an automated dishwasher to free her parents from tedious and repetitive daily housework. "Online shopping is very convenient and more discounts are available during some promotions in the run-up to the holiday," she added.

Healthcare products, smart home appliances and pet products have gained popularity among Chinese shoppers who have started stocking up ahead of the Lunar New Year, which falls on Sunday.

Data from Tmall, Alibaba's business-to-customer platform, showed that the demand for medical supplies, including thermometers, disinfectants, antigen test kits and pulse oximeters that measure oxygen concentration in arterial blood, has grown exponentially in recent weeks.

Sales of health and nutritional products to boost immune systems surged 400 percent month-on-month in the first half of January, with protein powder, vitamin C and probiotics increasingly favored by Chinese consumers, according to AliHealth, the health and medical unit of Alibaba.

Young consumers have shown rising enthusiasm for keeping pets and increased their spending on smart pet products. According to Tmall, the transaction volume of automatic pet feeders soared nearly 100 percent year-on-year in 2022, while the turnover of smart water dispensaries and pet drying boxes increased about 50 percent and 40 percent, respectively.

In addition, small home appliances and intelligent home equipment have seen robust growth in sales during the Spring Festival promotional gala. In particular, large-screen televisions, air fryers, floor-cleaning machines, dishwashers, blenders and other kitchen appliances have enjoyed rising popularity among Chinese consumers.

Online retailer Suning.com said the turnover of dishwashers at its brick-and-mortar stores skyrocketed 325 percent year-on-year from Jan 4 to Jan 11, while the transaction volume of 65-inch to 75-inch TVs and floor-cleaning products skyrocketed 190 percent and 56 percent, respectively, from a year earlier.

Hong Yong, an associate research fellow at the e-commerce research department of the Ministry of Commerce, said major Chinese online retailers have launched promotional events ahead of the weeklong Spring Festival holiday, the most important holiday for Chinese people, in an effort to promote the recovery of consumption.

Health-related products are expected to be at the forefront of people's minds in terms of making special purchases for the celebration. Hong noted that online promotional activities will further unleash pent-up consumption demand and inject strong impetus into China's immense consumer market following the optimization of China's COVID-19 response measures.

Moreover, fashion and personal care products have gained traction among Chinese consumers. Sales of smartwatches, plush toys and cosmetics increased by 122 percent, 150 percent and 500 percent, respectively, from Dec 16 to 26, compared with a month earlier, according to a report released by JD's omnichannel retail services JD Daojia and Shop Now, a one-hour delivery service jointly launched by JD and Dada Group.

Online orders placed for delivery to other cities increased by 118 percent year-on-year, with Shenzhen and Guangzhou in Guangdong province, Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu in Sichuan province ranking as the top five cities placing orders. These items are likely gifts arranged for family members and loved ones in other cities.

The report also pointed out that the sales growth rates of flowers and cleaning products were prominent in Beijing, while vegetables, eggs, ready-to-eat food and fruits ordered by people living in Shanghai doubled from Dec 16 to 26.

Pre-cooked food and meal kits have also been popular with consumers during this period, with cherries and strawberries having become the most popular fruits during the promotional gala. Furthermore, both sales of gift boxes filled with baked goods and *baijiu*, or white liquor, increased tenfold.

Consumers check out health-related gift boxes for the upcoming Spring Festival at a supermarket in Shanghai on Friday.
PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

People buy Lunar New Year decorations at a market in Changning, Hunan province, on Jan 11.
ZHOU XIUYUCHUN / XINHUA

> "Chinese shoppers have attached great importance to safety and health, and prefer to buy high-quality products, as well as enjoy the services that make their lives safer and more comfortable."
>
> **Wang Yun,** researcher at the Academy of Macroeconomic Research affiliated with the National Development and Reform Commission

Consumption has become a major driving force for boosting the stable recovery of the national economy. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed China's final consumption expenditure contributed to 65.4 percent of China's economic growth in 2021, driving GDP growth by 5.3 percentage points.

"Chinese shoppers have attached great importance to safety and health, and prefer to buy high-quality products, as well as enjoy the services that make their lives safer and more comfortable. Health-related commodities like nutritional products, medicine and fitness equipment have been increasingly favored by consumers," said Wang Yun, a researcher at the Academy of Macroeconomic Research affiliated with the National Development and Reform Commission, the country's top economic regulator.

With continuously optimized COVID-19 prevention and control measures, China's consumer market has witnessed rapid recovery, Wang said, adding she is optimistic that consumption, as a significant pillar of economic development, is expected to maintain growth momentum this year, with the growth rate reaching more than 6 percent.

The tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference in mid-December said that China will focus on boosting domestic demand by prioritizing the recovery and expansion of consumption in 2023. The country will strive to enhance consumption capacity, improve conditions and make innovations in creating more consumption scenarios.

Wang's views were echoed by Jiang Han, a senior researcher at market consultancy Pangoal, who said an increasing number of people are inclined to embrace their home lives, where they yearn for care and companionship.

Bai Ming, deputy director of international market research at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in Beijing, said Spring Festival is the traditional festival that Chinese people attach the most importance to, and it's also a peak season for consumption.

In the wake of COVID-19 being managed as a Class B infectious disease, Bai said the steady recovery of consumption during the Chinese Lunar New Year holiday will bode well for China's economic performance this year.

Chinese consumers have become more conservative regarding buying nonessential goods and are placing greater emphasis on the quality of products, with homegrown brands gaining increasing popularity among millennial and Generation Z consumers amid the COVID-19 pandemic, said a report released by global consultancy PwC.

Charting a new path for sustainable growth is more important than ever for corporate strategy, said Jennifer Ye, PwC consumer markets leader for the Chinese mainland, suggesting that brands should "enhance their product innovation capabilities, increase R&D investment and continuously create new products that meet the actual needs of consumers".

Consumption vouchers boost Spring Festival spending

By **ZHU WENQIAN**
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With the approaching Spring Festival, a large number of Chinese cities are distributing consumption vouchers to stimulate spending. The trend is expected to help expand domestic demand and strengthen market vitality, experts observed.

Following the government's optimization of COVID-19 response measures, the domestic consumer market began to regain vigor during the holiday season.

Tianjin started its second round issuance of consumption vouchers on Jan 11, and the vouchers can be redeemed until the end of February. The local government will invest 115 million yuan ($17 million) in boosting consumption by issuing four types of vouchers that can be redeemed when purchasing cars, home appliances, daily consumer goods, and catering and travel products.

Based on calculations by the Tianjin commerce bureau, coupled with various discounts launched by retailers and online platforms, the amount of consumption coupons released by the local government this round is expected to boost spending by more than 3.3 billion yuan.

"As Spring Festival, a peak consumption season, draws near, issuing consumption vouchers serves as an effective way to help stimulate spending in the short term," said Zheng Lanxiang, a professor at Anhui University.

To revitalize small- and micro-sized businesses and highlight the theme of benefiting residents, many cities have also issued general consumption vouchers in small amounts through different online platforms such as payment platform Alipay, short-video platform Douyin and on-demand retail platform Meituan.

After obtaining such general consumption coupons online, consumers can enjoy preferential treatment when shopping at numerous application scenarios, such as supermarkets, convenience stores and food markets, said Yu Pengzhou, deputy secretary-general of Tianjin's local government.

With Spring Festival around the corner, the ways of using the consumption coupons issued in this round boast distinctive festival features. At the time of issuing consumption vouchers, many cities have also introduced traditional Spring Festival promotional activities to comprehensively activate spending potential.

For instance, Tianjin has organized New Year's marketplaces, focusing on the sales of time-honored local brands, local specialties and supplies for Spring Festival, as it aims to fully tap the sales potential of local products and brands.

In Maanshan, Anhui province, customers can get a discount of up to 10,000 yuan per person when they purchase cars with consumption vouchers, according to Lu Xiaojian, general manager of an experience store of Hongqi, the premium arm of China's FAW Group, in Maanshan, Xinhua News Agency reported.

To help promote the recovery of the cultural tourism market during the holiday, many places have issued consumption vouchers that can be redeemed for booking hotels, scenic spots and other cultural tourism products.

On Jan 11, Xiamen, a coastal city in Fujian province, issued 35,000 travel consumption vouchers to residents and tourists, and the total value of the vouchers reached 7 million yuan.

Those who have obtained the coupons can book hotels and guesthouses on a specified platform before Feb 11, and each voucher is worth 200 yuan in discounts, according to the cultural and tourism bureau of Xiamen.

Next, Xiamen will also introduce a number of awards and subsidies for qualified travel agencies and commercial operators to promote the recovery of the cultural tourism sector.

Between mid-December and Spring Festival, the Nanshan district of Shenzhen, Guangdong province, will issue 200 million yuan worth of consumption vouchers to encourage the purchase of consumer goods such as cars, home appliances, digital devices, clothing, jewelry, watches and food, the local government said.

Previous data from the commercial departments of local governments showed that the issuance of consumption vouchers has an obvious effect on stimulating consumption.

From June to December last year, Hubei province invested 1.26 billion yuan in financial funds to issue consumption vouchers that helped boost consumption value by 5.05 billion yuan.

Shoppers browse selections at a fresh food store in Tianjin on Jan 12. TONG YU / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

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COMMENT

Editorials

Countries face clear choice of further baleful fragmentation or mutually beneficial cooperation

In his speech in Davos on Tuesday, Vice-Premier Liu He struck a tone that matched perfectly the theme of this year's World Economic Forum – "Cooperation in a Fragmented World".

In a speech that was well-received by many Western observers, Liu, a key national economic policy adviser, sought to both allay overseas misgivings about Chinese policy orientation and reiterate the country's continuous commitment to harmonious interaction with the rest of the world. Whether through choice or misunderstanding, there have been some voices suggesting that after decades of reform and opening-up, China is backpedaling that process. Liu assured his global audience in Davos that simply isn't the case.

"All-round opening-up is the basis of State policy and the key driver of economic progress. China's national reality dictates that opening up to the world is a must, not an expediency," Liu said.

Enumerating the lessons China has learned from its recent economic achievements, Liu highlighted the need to prioritize economic development, continue market-oriented economic reforms, "unswervingly" support the vibrant private sector and encourage entrepreneurship, adhere to all-round opening-up to the outside world, govern the country according to law and pursue innovation-driven development.

He stressed that at home, China will press ahead with market economy reforms; abroad, it would seek greater international collaboration. "Some people say China will go for the planned economy. That's by no means possible," he said, stressing that the pursuit of "common prosperity" doesn't mean the country enshrines egalitarianism or welfarism, but that as the country develops all Chinese people will be better off. It means there will be equal opportunities, but no guarantee of equal outcomes. It is aimed at preventing polarization and it can only be attained through development, which in turn is driven by entrepreneurs, including foreign investors, Liu said.

"Foreign investments are welcome in China, and the door to China will only open up further," Liu emphasized.

With the world political and economic landscapes undergoing profound changes and various unexpected incidents having occurred in the past few years, international cooperation is the only way to bridge the widening gaps dividing the present-day world, and mutual understanding is the prerequisite for strengthening cooperation, as Liu said.

But the strategic mistrust runs so deep and broad among major countries that words alone won't suffice to heal the wounds. As well as closer, more candid communication, actions matching words will be of critical significance to eliminating erroneous perceptions. The Netherlands can set an immediate example in this respect. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte visited the White House on Tuesday, during which he discussed with US President Joe Biden the new US restrictions on exporting chip-making technology to China that the Biden administration wants the Netherlands to also put in place.

Prior to their meeting, Dutch Trade Minister Liesje Schreinemacher said in a television interview on Sunday that the Netherlands will not summarily accept US restrictions on exporting chip-making technology to China and that decoupling from China was an illusion. Holding to that line will reinforce the message that even the US allies are unhappy with the US' fragmentation bombs.

US should prove visit worth the welcome

Although the world had raised expectations that the world's two largest economies would bury their hatchet at an early date after the Joe Biden administration took office, half way into its term, the America-is-back administration's say-one-thing-do-the-other style has repeatedly dashed hopes of an upturn in relations.

Although Wang Wenbin, spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry, extended a welcome to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is scheduled to visit China on Feb 5, the last visit to China by the top US diplomat, Mike Pompeo, lasted only three hours.

Feb 5 is Lantern Festival, which promotes reconciliation and peace. The auspiciousness of such an arrangement can only be materialized if the US stops playing its tricks. Unfortunately, such propitious anticipation proved fruitless the last time, as despite the first telephone talk between the two leaders after Biden took office being arranged on Spring Festival eve two years ago, an occasion to ring out the old and ring in the new, his administration has persisted with the China policy it inherited on taking office.

China has always viewed and developed its relations with the US in accordance with the three principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation proposed by President Xi Jinping. It is a pity that the US side has still not formed a correct understanding of China. With the political struggle between the Democrats and Republicans intensifying at home, the Biden administration seems to be riding that dragon by the ears as a means to appease its critics. Rather than pursuing dialogue and win-win cooperation, it is resorting to confrontation and a zero-sum game.

The consensus the two leaders have reached apparently does not have as much binding power on the US side as it has on the Chinese side. Washington should know that although it only takes one side to derail the relationship, it entails the joint efforts of both sides to keep it on the track of sound and stable development.

So if the US side really wants to effectively manage the risks and uncertainties with China, it should in the first place discard the confrontation and competition in its troika approach toward China and show sincerity to expand the common ground on which to strengthen cooperation.

Therefore, to make the most of his visit, Blinken should avoid being distracted by the China-bashing frenzy in Washington. Getting tough with China is not the way to win the dogfight at home and only brings more troubles to the US and the world.

Rather than showing its softness, as it perhaps fears, taking the initiative to mend relations with China will demonstrate the Biden administration's courage, foresight and wisdom. All the walls and barriers that have been built by the US side over the past few years to block the development of healthy relations with China are testament to the potential of the rebound of relations if they are demolished.

Quad members grinding their own axes

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has urged India and Japan to do more to enhance mutual trust in the regional security sphere and act in the interest of peace and stability in the region.

The urging came after the Indian Air Force and Japan Air Self-Defense Force started their first joint aerial exercise, Veer Guardian 2023, on Jan 12 at Hyakuri Air Base, Japan. The 15-day drill is a poisoned fruit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which the United States has formed with the two countries plus Australia with the aim of containing China, something it makes no bones about.

Given New Delhi's reluctance to throw its weight behind the US on the Ukraine crisis, Washington should be happy to see that Tokyo is helping to pull New Delhi closer to its side through the bilateral drill.

India's attitude toward the US' invitation to join its fight club has always been lukewarm. Being a member of the Quad, as well as a member of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it pays special attention to raising its own profile through balanced diplomacy.

By agreeing to take part in the drills, New Delhi is continuing to stick to its balanced diplomacy, but as observers say, it is also part of its efforts to explore the possibility of diversifying its weapon sources.

India can gain first-hand experience through the drill with Japan about how the US warplanes perform. The air force of Japan depends heavily on the US for weapons, intelligence and supplies.

On the other hand, Japan will not waste the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the capabilities of the Russian stealth jets of the Indian Air Force, such as the Russian SU-30 MKI, that are taking part in the exercise.

Although the drill was settled months ago during the Quad meeting in Tokyo last year, its timing is apparently well calculated to serve the Fumio Kishida government's agenda as it came at the same time as Kishida's visits to the US and other Western allies, in which security cooperation was a focus.

Japan is trying hard to prove to the US its use value as both a spear and a shield. In exchange, it looks forward to the US granting it more space to normalize its status at an early date, preparing for the re-rise of militarism upon which hinges its smoldering empire ambitions.

That means despite its small size, the US-orchestrated bilateral air force drill provides both sides a grinder on which to sharpen their own axes, but the US should know that will not necessarily serve its interests in the long run.

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Cai Meng

Opinion Line

Japan's water discharge will pollute sea of all mankind

Japan recently announced that it will start discharging radioactive water from the wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean in spring or summer, sparking opposition from many countries.

The decision triggered opposition even within Japan. Masahide Kimura, a member of a Japanese anti-nuclear campaign group, said the dumping of nuclear contaminated water into the sea violates the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter, the 1996 protocol to the convention, as well as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Kimura believes that storing the discharged water was the best alternative, and efforts should be made to prevent the continued rise in nuclear contaminated water. However, Japan's environment ministry has not yet assessed the environmental impact of what will be a decades-long discharge of nuclear-contaminated water into the sea. Masanobu Sakamoto, president of the National Fisheries Cooperative Federation of Japan, said on Friday that their opposition to the discharge of the radioactive water into the sea has not changed one bit. Hiroyuki Uchida, mayor of Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture, said that the discharge plan has not yet gained the "full understanding of citizens and fishery stakeholders" and he hoped the government and Tokyo Electric Power Company will fulfill their original promise.

Last September, a joint petition of 42,000 people opposing the discharge plan and demanding other ways to deal with the contaminated water was submitted to TEPCO and Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. A poll published by Asahi Shimbun in early 2021 showed that 55 percent of those surveyed were opposed to the release of treated nuclear contaminated water into the sea.

Anna Malindog-Uy, vice-president for Externals, Asian Century Philippines Strategic Studies Institute, said that the Japanese government's unilateral discharge plan despite opposition from local fishermen and neighboring countries is a reckless and irresponsible move that is not only against international environmental law but also poses a threat to human beings and all species.

— HAIWAINET.CN

Kids unsafe in world's only superpower

In which country are toddlers threatened by guns?

In the United States, the world's only superpower, they are. In a security camera video that has gone viral, a 4-year-old in Beech Grove, Indiana, was seen waving a pistol, aiming it at himself and at his neighbor's door in an apartment complex hallway and pulling the trigger. A neighbor who saw it called the police, who rushed there and arrested the father.

Fortunately there was no immediate danger to the kid as there was no bullet in the gun's chamber, but not every kid in the US might be as fortunate. According to a Small Arms Survey in the US, American civilians own more than 393 million guns, 120.48 guns per 100 US residents. Gun violence in various forms killed more than 44,000 people in the US in 2022.

Two decades after the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, protecting the citizens' right to keep arms, the rampant gun culture in the US has failed to protect its people from tyranny. Instead, it is compelling them to buy a gun in self-defense, further increasing risks for everyone.

US soldiers fought a civil war and two world wars to secure its people. No country has the strength to wage a war against the US today, but its children face a threat from within without having to go to any battlefield, because of its gun culture.

All efforts at gun control have failed because of the opposition from interest groups, the National Rifle Association notably.

Failure to control guns has exposed the deep social divide in the US. Even on issues concerning people's lives, there are opposing voices and no one can silence them even if it threatens lives.

We hope gun control is brought in sooner and the deep social divide in the US is fixed.

— ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Tailored policies needed for demographic changes

A drop of 850,000 in the country's population in the year 2022, which was announced by the National Bureau of Statistics on Tuesday, is the first in six decades since 1962.

This demographic change comes almost a decade earlier than the Chinese government and the United Nations projected. Which necessitates adjustment in the country's social policies.

In the first place, much more work needs to be done to encourage young couples to have more children. Specific measures should be adopted to relieve young people of their worries about the expense and difficulties involved in raising their children — housing, kindergartens, schools, childcare and other related problems.

Conducive conditions need to be created for young people to be willing to have children. For example, women of child-bearing age should be relieved of the worries about their career development.

Subsidies need to be considered to encourage couples to have more kids, which should considerably ease the financial burden of parents.

With negative population growth comes the rapid expansion of an aging population, and it is expected that people above 60 will make up 30 percent of the population around the year 2035. This too requires the making of specific policies and detailed implementation of policies concerning pensions, care for the aged and development of related services for this burgeoning social group.

While tailored policies are essential to address the country's demographic changes, it should be recognized that the decline of population growth is an unavoidable trend of a country's economic and social development. As material well-being improves, people have less desire for children.

Although there will be no short supply of labor as far as economic development is concerned in the years to come, according to information from the National Bureau of Statistics, as high-quality development will be sustained by artificial intelligence and robots as well as other automation technologies. But attention needs to be paid to the training of professionals and technicians to facilitate this so that industrial development is kept compatible with the structure of the country's population.

The demographic changes should serve as a reminder that the country must further its endeavor to modernize. Modernized industries, agriculture and services are indispensable for the country to deal with all the problems brought about by the new demographic development pattern.

— ZHU YUAN, CHINA DAILY

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COMMENT

Zhou Yuehui and Gao Yongzhi

Moves to prevent people slipping back into poverty

The Communist Party of China has developed a better understanding of the prevailing trend while prioritizing the eradication of poverty as a principal task of governance after the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012. The CPC united and led the Chinese people in winning the biggest battle against poverty in human history, and solving the problem of poverty that had plagued the Chinese nation for several thousands of years.

Yet China will need more time to eliminate relative poverty even though it has eradicated absolute poverty in the shortest period of time.

In fact, despite being the world's largest developing country, China is still in the primary stage of socialism, facing unbalanced and inadequate development. Although it is possible for those who have emerged out of poverty to slip back into poverty, China will constantly monitor their socioeconomic condition and take industrial, fiscal and financial measures, and pair assistance policies to make sure that does not happen again.

Also, the model of poverty alleviation has changed from one that mainly relied on external support like a blood transfusion to making more sustained efforts to climb up the socioeconomic ladder. And since most people lifted out of poverty are gainfully employed (including self-employed) and have stable incomes, China is not likely to see a large number of people falling back into extreme poverty again.

More important, China now ranks among the upper-middle-income countries and is on the threshold of becoming a high-income country according to the World Bank's criterion of poverty headcount ratio at $6.85 a day (2017 PPP) (purchasing power parity). As a result, some foreign observers believe there are still 270 million impoverished people in China.

According to the World Bank, a country with a gross national income per capita of $12,696 or more qualifies as a higher-income country, but the per capita income is used to pay for all the expenses of a person including food, clothing, shelter, housing, education and medication. But rural residents in China do not need to spend much on housing, education, and they are covered by basic or rural cooperative medical treatment insurance.

So China needs to set its own poverty line based on its own reality, which is, in 2020 a person making less than 4,000 yuan ($594.6) a year could not be listed as impoverished, rendering the claim that China still has 270 million impoverished people groundless.

SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

Yet the government should realize that China faces the daunting challenge of consolidating and expanding the achievements of poverty alleviation. It is very important to adopt policies to minimize the possibility of people newly lifted out of poverty slipping back into poverty.

First, a long-term mechanism should be established to monitor the income, education level, basic medical treatment, housing security and safe drinking water of the people who have been newly lifted out of poverty, in order to prevent them from slipping back into absolute poverty. The goal of the follow-up monitoring is to intervene through support measures if they show any signs of falling into poverty again. The idea is to regularly analyze, and check the rural areas' monitoring results and take steps to improve people's quality of life.

China's experience shows that only when a country mobilizes all sectors of society to unite and act can poverty be defeated. The government should also provide more fiscal, financial and industrial support to facilitate the implementation of policies.

Second, there should be consistency in policy to prevent people from sliding back into poverty. People in counties have been given a five-year grace period from the day they emerged out of poverty during which they will continue to enjoy the main support policies, which will be adjusted and optimized category-wise. Over time, the resources leveraged to strengthen the poverty elimination drive will be redirected to rural revitalization programs, which will boost the development of agriculture, rural areas and the well-being of farmers.

Third, efforts should also be made to provide more funds and increase other types of assistance for areas that have recently emerged out of poverty. While follow-up support should be given to the resettled communities whose employment should be secured, the authorities need to provide technological, equipment, financial and marketing support for local industries and create more jobs for people who have newly emerged out of poverty, and enhance regular and tiered assistance to low-income rural residents to prevent a large-scale re-emergence of poverty.

Fourth, the biggest strength of a socialist country such as China is pooling resources to solve major problems. China's experience shows that only when a country mobilizes all sectors of society to unite and act can poverty be defeated. The government should also provide more fiscal, financial and industrial support to facilitate the implementation of policies.

Fifth, Party secretaries at the provincial, city, county, township and village levels must be held accountable for the work of rural revitalization and consolidating the achievements of poverty alleviation during the grace period. The status of formerly impoverished people will be evaluated and Party committees and governments at all levels will continue to take measures to ensure that people do not sink back into poverty.

There is no reason to believe that a large number of people recently lifted out of poverty could return to poverty. However, consolidating the achievements of the poverty alleviation program remains a formidable task, for which relevant departments need to take measures to ensure people do not slip back into poverty in large numbers, and establish long-term mechanisms to promote rural revitalization.

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Feng Da Hsuan and Liang Haiming

West's smearing of BRI as 'debt trap' won't help developing countries

The international community has been criticizing the Belt and Road Initiative, claiming it will push the Belt and Road countries into a debt trap.

Yet there has been no substantive research confirming the claim is true. Such criticisms are mostly part of the politicization of what essentially is an economic issue, especially since data show that the Belt and Road Initiative can shorten logistics time by about 2.5 percent, reduce global trade costs by 2.2 percent, and increase global real income by as high as 2.9 percent.

Government's debt doesn't stunt growth

According to the Barro-Ricardo effect, government debt does not affect economic growth at all. And research by the International Monetary Fund shows that there is an optimal debt ratio between the GDP growth of the different countries and their governments' sovereign debt. According to this study, if debt reaches the optimal ratio, it will maximize the economic growth rate.

Economists across the world have been debating on the relationship between government debt and economic development. Yet since the Belt and Road projects are being implemented only since 2013, there is not enough data to carry out an in-depth study into the relationship between the infrastructure projects and the economic growth of the Belt and Road countries.

However, this has not stopped economists, political scientists, government officials, think tanks and the media from India, the United States, Australia and other countries to "classify" it as part of China's "debt-trap diplomacy".

For example, Indian geo-strategist Brahma Chellaney published an article in the World Press Syndicate in January 2017 in which he had used the term "debt trap" to stigmatize the Belt and Road Initiative. Scholars like Chellaney accuse China of using opaque loan conditions to provide infrastructure financing in order to gain access to these countries' military or strategic resources.

By blatantly terming this as a form of debt-trap diplomacy, the scholars portray the Belt and Road Initiative in a bad light. However, the politicians and political scientists from the above-mentioned countries and regions that politicize economic issues are not without counter-arguments.

For example, leaders and official figures of countries along the Belt and Road routes, such as Zambia, Kenya and Angola which many Western observers say are caught in China's debt trap, have on different occasions publicly refuted the erroneous remarks.

Indeed, even some prominent US scholars and think tanks have studied the data and published reports refuting the "China debt-trap theory". For example, Deborah Brautigam and Meg Rithmire, two distinguished professors of political economy at Johns Hopkins University and Harvard University, respectively, have asserted that China's "debt trap" is a myth. The scholars also said that in some countries like Montenegro, Kenya and Zambia, there is clear evidence that the Western media spread such fears without providing any evidence to support their claim.

Also, a RAND Corporation report from the US says that railway connectivity will boost the export value of countries along the Belt and Road by 2.8 percent.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and many Chinese scholars have been repeatedly refuting the West's "debt trap diplomacy theory". Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin, for instance, quoted World Bank data on July 2022 to say that 49 African countries had borrowed $696 billion. But some 75 percent came from multilateral financial institutions and private financial institutions.

Four interesting features of BRI

Our research into the Belt and Road Initiative has uncovered four interesting features.

First, ironically, politicians in countries along the Belt and Road route who hyped up the "debt trap theory" are the first ones to strengthen cooperation with China when they come to power. For instance if they happen to be in the opposition, they can gain enough public support and thus votes to oust the ruling party by leveraging China's "debt trap diplomacy theory".

The infrastructure construction needs of the Belt and Road countries were ignored by the US and European countries and their banks. In contrast, China is willing to lend a helping hand to such countries and provide Chinese technology and standards to build infrastructure facilities.

What is really ironic is that once these opposition politicians come to power, they do a U-turn and seek Chinese investments because they understand the importance of boosting the national economy.

Second, a key feature of Chinese investment in Belt and Road countries is that it tends to focus on long-term mutual economic benefits. This is a natural consequence of China's political and social structures.

It is the surety that the Chinese government will honor its commitments that has earned China support and praise from the Belt and Road countries. This is very important as the period of ROII (return on infrastructure investment) tends to be very long and profits cannot be made in the short term.

No wonder Chinese investors in Belt and Road countries always pay greater attention to long-term rather than short-term economic benefits. For example, according to Indonesia's official estimates, the Jakarta-Bandung railway line in Indonesia, which could start operations from May, is built by China for a cost of about $8 billion.

But while it is likely to generate more than $23.1 billion in revenue, it will take the next 40 years to realize it, according to our research.

It is because of such infrastructure projects and deepening diplomatic ties that Sino-Indonesian trade relations will continue to deepen, bucking the global trend. Indeed, in 2021 bilateral trade reached $124.43 billion, up 58.6 percent year-on-year.

Also, China has been Indonesia's second-largest foreign investor since 2019, and has diversified its investment in fields such as electricity, mining, automobile manufacturing, emerging network industries, as well as financing.

Third, interestingly, one of the reasons why debtor countries want to borrow money from China to build or improve infrastructure is because it can help them pay their debts to Western countries.

At present, about 70 percent of the investments in Belt and Road projects are concentrated in infrastructure construction, and the rest in the fields such as the energy, health, innovative technology, and tourism sectors.

Belt and Road countries borrow money from China to improve their infrastructure, in order to develop their economy so they can repay the loans taken from Western countries and multilateral financial institutions. Improvement of infrastructure can boost the economy and increase government revenue. That's why the Joe Biden administration has launched an infrastructure plan worth more than $1.2 trillion, hoping to stimulate the United States' economic recovery.

The infrastructure construction needs of the Belt and Road countries were ignored by the US and European countries and their banks. In contrast, China is willing to lend a helping hand to such countries and provide Chinese technology and standards to build infrastructure facilities.

Only by promoting economic development and thus increasing tax revenues can a government generate more funds to repay the loans it has taken from Western countries and multilateral financial institutions, boost the economy and improve people's livelihoods.

Fourth, the continuous and substantial interest rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve and the new wave of COVID-19 infections are the real challenges Belt and Road countries have to overcome to properly manage their debts. In fact, the Fed's recent aggressive interest rate hikes have caused debt crises in many Belt and Road countries with relatively high US dollar debts.

Many Belt and Road countries with significant debt risks generally have diverse creditors — from the US to European countries to Japan and from the IMF to the World Bank. China is certainly not the only creditor of countries with high debt risks.

The West must help developing countries

So instead of accusing China of forcing Belt and Road countries into a debt trap, the West should focus on how to help the debtor countries to overcome the debt challenges and strengthen consultation and cooperation among countries to provide systematic and comprehensive solutions for countries' debt resolution.

After all, the only long-term and real solution is to implement a comprehensive plan and focus on assisting these countries to hasten their economic recovery and enhance their development capabilities.

Charles Darwin famously said that the eventual survival of a species is not because it is the strongest or the smartest; it is because it is most adaptable to change. Among all the investment projects promoting the development of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's rate of interest on loans may not be the lowest and Chinese technology may not be the best in the world, but Chinese projects are certainly best suited to promote the economic development of Belt and Road countries.

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GLOBAL VIEWS

YAO GUIMEI

Cutting the strings

African countries no longer willing to let West call the shots for them

JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

In 2022, African countries withstood the tests from internal and external factors and maintained overall peace and development. This year, African countries will seek to maintain the momentum for peace and development despite the possibility of more turmoil, and their prospects for development are worth looking forward to.

The possibility of political and security turbulence in Africa is rising, but the African Union and regional organizations are also making every effort to maintain peace.

First, the presidential and parliamentary elections under multi-party democracies are important windows for observing political trends in Africa. This year, 17 African countries will hold presidential and parliamentary elections. Among them, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Mali, Zimbabwe and other countries that have experienced election disputes deserve high attention. If elections in these countries can be held smoothly, peace and stability will remain the overarching theme for political development in Africa. Otherwise, large-scale turmoil could be triggered. Second, whether regional hotspot issues can cool down will have a major impact on the political situation in Africa. It requires stronger efforts by governments and regional organizations in Africa to move forward the political transition process in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Chad — countries where coups took place — as well as the peace process in Ethiopia and situation in the eastern part of the DRC. Third, issues such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, new variants of the coronavirus, terrorism, and food security will continue to affect politics through their impacts on the economy, society, and people's well-being, thereby aggravating the turmoil on the African continent.

In the face of potential chaos in Africa's political and security fields, the African Union and regional organizations will respond to challenges. The AU will focus on hot issues in the political, economic and security fields by holding a leaders' summit, and charting the general direction of Africa's development. The bloc will continue to seek settlements to the internal conflict in Ethiopia and promote the reaching of a peace agreement. It will also unite African sub-regional organizations to actively intervene in issues in the eastern DRC and the peace process of countries where coups have taken place, and continue to play an important role in restoring constitutional order and containing terrorism.

Africa's economic growth is slow and unstable, but there is resilience in its development.

Despite all the turbulence in the international economic landscape, the African continent is endowed with advantages in natural resources, an ever-expanding market and a vibrant demographic structure, as well as huge potential that can be unleashed by the digital economy and green transformation. In the context of a potential global economic slowdown this year, the resource-intensive and major commodity exporters in Africa will face the challenge of weakening market demand. However, with the increasingly fierce international competition for Africa's key mineral resources, the export prices for related resource products will remain high, which will help African resource-rich countries increase their export revenue and attract foreign direct investment. Since many African countries have adopted tightening monetary policies, their inflation rates will go down, but they will still face relatively high pressure trying to maintain stable commodity prices. The financing costs in some African countries will rise sharply. This year the African economy will still face the challenges from unstable supply chains, pressure from the repayment of huge debts, instability caused by election cycles, geopolitics and wars, and food insecurity caused by unfavorable weather conditions. To this end, The Economist predicts that Africa's overall economic growth rate will be 3.2 percent this year. Most African countries are expected to maintain growth, but the actual GDP growth rate of each country will be quite different, and the development trends for African countries will diversify.

Relations between major countries and Africa have been further deepened. Africa has developed a stronger awareness of independent development and greater ability to resist outside pressure. China-Africa relations are expected to reach a new level.

Following the release of its Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa in August 2022, the Joe Biden administration made multiple commitments and launched a series of new measures to counterbalance China at the US-Africa Leaders Summit in December. It highlighted the deepening of the United States' partnerships with African governments and non-governmental organizations, and followed China in expressing support for the accession of the African Union to the G20. The intention of France and Japan to compete with China and Russia is also more than obvious. French President Emmanuel Macron visited Africa twice, blaming the Russia-Ukraine conflict for undermining Africa's food and energy security and trying to seek Algeria's energy support so that Western countries can have more confidence in imposing sanctions against Russia. At the eighth Tokyo International Conference on African Development, Japan alluded to China-Africa relations and attacked China's model of economic cooperation with Africa. Japan also took advantage of the meeting to join the other G7 countries in isolating Russia. It blamed Russia's special military operation for skyrocketing food, fertilizer and energy prices and affecting the quality of life of the African people. In the face of the containment from the US and other Western countries, Russia is also competing with Western countries for support from Africa, and the nation is deeply involved in the anti-terrorism operations in Mali, West Africa. Moscow plans to hold a Russia-Africa summit in 2023 to comprehensively deepen Russia-Africa cooperation.

With global powers becoming more deeply involved in African affairs and their competition becoming increasingly fierce, the prospects for China-Africa cooperation are still promising despite a certain degree of disruption.

First of all, African countries have rejected the smearing of China-Africa relations by the US and other Western countries in disregard of facts. This demonstrates the higher level of awareness of independence and self-reliance among African countries and their heightened ability to withstand pressure. South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor said at a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken: "We can't be made party to conflict between China and the United States of America, and I may say it does cause instability for all of us because it affects the global economic system." Macky Sall, president of Senegal and current chairman of the African Union said: "Let no one tell us no, don't work with so-and-so, just work with us. We want to work and trade with everyone." Second, China still has enough confidence in maintaining its leading position in international cooperation with Africa. Although the US is paying more attention to Africa than before, Africa is far from being the priority in Washington's global strategy. There remain differences that are difficult to overcome between the two sides in terms of the US' interference in the affairs of African countries and the actions it is taking to maintain its hegemony. And Africa's fundamental strategic position in China's diplomacy has become increasingly prominent. In particular, China and Africa have deepened their political mutual trust, which sets a solid foundation for mutually beneficial cooperation. China's leading advantages in Africa's trade, investment and infrastructure are irreplaceable in the short term. In the future, China will continue to follow the principles of sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith and a commitment to the greater good and shared interests and benefit, continue to fulfill its commitment to respect Africa and support Africa's development, and give full play to the influence and appeal of the advantages of its national system.

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ZHOU TAIDONG

Meeting point

Shared common interests should pave the way for the EU and China to find ways to strengthen cooperation in Africa

MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

China and the European Union are big players in the development of the African region. Although fundamental differences in their approach to development make large-scale collaboration unlikely, both share common interests in the African region, such as addressing climate change, food security and biodiversity, combatting transnational terrorism and maritime piracy, and managing public health crises, among others.

It is important to maintain arenas for dialogue wherever possible, and focusing on competition in decision-making would be wrong. Excluding competitors will not guarantee the success of policies and prioritizing competition will not benefit African interests.

First, there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to development. With China's rapid growth and the transformation in its economy and society, Chinese aid — and other investments — have grown dramatically. Its development success has shown that one of the poorest countries can transform into the world's second-largest economy, and eliminate extreme poverty. It can therefore present itself not only as a major source of development finance, but also as an example that rapid growth and transformation is possible.

The EU and European countries should acknowledge that China represents an inspiring alternative to many developing countries, and respect the right of developing countries to make their own choices. In the meantime, it is worth noting that the Western experience is diversified in terms of both development routes and models. The varied experiences of many EU nations present a useful supplement to the often too dominating role of a neo-liberal Anglo-Saxon model. In Nordic countries, for example, the state has played and continues to play a considerably more active role than the neo-liberal textbook indicates.

Second, both sides should see their respective presence in Africa as an opportunity. It is important that European actors acknowledge the positive impact and potential of Chinese development aid. The development model and aid modalities of traditional donors (European countries included) have had some failings. China brings a different approach and can offer interesting lessons. China's development aid has at least four potential advantages, such as being more focused on infrastructure; less bureaucratic with lower transaction costs; more efficient with lower costs; and allowing more policy space (lower conditionality) and increasing the bargaining power of African countries vis-a-vis other donors.

China's infrastructure- and growth-focused approach should not be seen as a threat and instead should be seen as a big complement that can form synergy with European countries. For example, from 2011 to 2020, a sizeable portion of the Official Development Assistance by the Development Assistance Committee donor countries — an average 46 percent — went to social development areas such as education, gender equality, health, and water and sanitation, while only about 20 percent went to infrastructure and manufacturing.

In this regard, China's ability and willingness to offer development finance to Africa provides alternative sources of funding to meet the development needs of African countries, including infrastructure, manufacturing and social development. China-backed African infrastructure projects also improve the operating environment for all parties — including EU firms. Chinese-constructed power plants can make it easier for businesses to operate effectively, and Chinese-built roads and rail lines can get goods to market for all actors in an economy.

Meanwhile, China welcomes Europe's efforts in building local capacity in skilled labor and supporting oversight and judicial institutions and civil society to demand transparency and accountability regarding investments as this also benefits China's interests in the region.

Third, China and the EU can push forward trilateral cooperation. There are growing opportunities for China and the EU and its members to converge on certain issues such as how to help partner countries achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, as well as share experiences and good practices in evaluating development results and harmonizing standards. For example, proposals for trilateral cooperation have been put forward among the EU, China and African countries through joint business ventures in Africa to promote sustainable development, innovation and institutional capacity building. Working together would allow the EU and China to complement each other and achieve goals they set for themselves that benefit Africa.

Another development in trilateral cooperation has been the inclusion of non-governmental organizations in the implementation of foreign aid projects and a positive message from the Chinese government encouraging NGOs to play a greater role in foreign aid. Trilateral cooperation should focus on areas that are prioritized by both China and other actors, such as renewable and green development, to which China has committed itself and for which the EU has set priorities. Efforts should also be made to foster engagement between European and Chinese research communities, and the private sector to inform the engagement process and provide a basis for stronger official engagement.

The EU and China can also examine how to promote a multilateral system that facilitates such engagement. Both support regional structures such as the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the Regional Economic Communities. This creates opportunities for cooperation at the regional level.

Fourth, China and the EU can identify and encourage constructive responses to international and local concerns. China is committed to becoming a major responsible power, which means that China is likely to adopt many of the good practices formed earlier by different partners (also incorporating its own experiences). China's second Africa policy paper has made it clear that it stands with an open mind, ready to strengthen coordination and cooperation with other countries. European countries can show more understanding as different Chinese stakeholders are involved in this process and the process toward high-standards is not linear and takes time.

For example, China is now facing the normal dilemma of a creditor when the borrower faces payment problems. Western creditors have already faced that challenge, and through a very demanding process have developed solutions with varying success. Openly and honestly sharing the lessons learned from these processes could benefit all parties. One obvious answer is a greater emphasis on economic evaluations, and on the operation and maintenance costs that infrastructure investments imply. Open dialogues based on confidence, though challenging in the context of intense global competition, could provide useful lessons and are worth trying to maintain.

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LIFE

A target with a natural outcome

World's largest national park system takes shape, involving local communities in the protection of wildlife and habitats

As Wang Jinqiang walks to work each morning, his journey is accompanied by the high-pitched calls of Hainan gibbons, wild animals whose population he is employed to track and count.

Since the start of winter, 56-year-old Wang and his colleagues have spent more than 15 days every month living in the mountains of China's southernmost tropical province of Hainan. Their task is to monitor the world's rarest primate, with a view to helping it flourish after decades of pressure from human activities.

Wang is a member of the Hainan gibbon monitoring team in the Bawangling area of the Hainan Tropical Rainforest National Park, one of the first five national parks established in China.

Starting in 2015, China launched 10 pilot national parks to protect the natural environment and biodiversity. In October 2021, the country officially designated five of these pilot projects as national parks, further improving the national park system.

In December 2022, it took another step, setting out a plan that envisages the creation of the world's largest national park system by 2035.

The spatial layout plan for national parks was issued jointly by several government bodies, including the National Forestry and Grassland Administration and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment. The plan includes a total of 49 candidate sites for the construction of national parks.

These candidate sites, including the five that have already been developed into national parks, cover an area of around 1.1 million square kilometers across 28 provincial-level regions. The sites were selected based on their ecological importance, unique natural landscapes and rich biodiversity, according to the plan.

Wider participation

In the 1980s, the population of Hainan gibbons dropped to as low as seven due to excessive hunting and lumbering. However, thanks to conservation efforts, the gibbon population in Hainan is currently estimated at 36, living in five family groups, according to the latest official figures.

Among the key measures implemented was ecological relocation in core protected areas.

Gaofeng village is located in the core area of Hainan national park. Villagers were relocated to a government-funded resettlement community, and each family was allocated a two-story house of 115 square meters. Later, the villagers became involved in the edible fungus industry, which helped increase their incomes.

Villager Fu Guohua says that his family has had easier access to education and medical services since moving to the new community, and their lives have improved a lot. He used to make a living by tapping rubber, earning up to 3,000 yuan ($443) a year. Now, he is in charge of a mushroom facility, with a regular monthly salary of 4,000 yuan.

The development of China's national parks, along with the improvement of the ecological environment and reduction in human activity, can also be seen in Sanjiangyuan National Park in Northwest China's Qinghai province.

The Sanjiangyuan area is known as Asia's "water tower" as it contains the headwaters of the Yangtze, Yellow and Lancang rivers. Madoi county in Qinghai's Golog Tibetan autonomous prefecture, where the source region of the Yellow River is located, is a fine example of national park construction.

From the 1960s to the '80s, Madoi's main industry was animal husbandry. At that time, each household in the county possessed hundreds of cattle and sheep, and the development of animal husbandry had boosted the local economy.

However, from the late '80s to the beginning of this century, due to various factors, the wetlands and lakes in Madoi decreased, grassland vegetation degraded, the water conservation capacity dropped sharply and biodiversity was affected.

To restore the ecological environment, the county government implemented a series of measures, including initiating ecological migration programs, imposing a grazing ban in certain areas, and encouraging local herders to participate in ecological protection. The measures have proved effective, reversing the trend of deterioration in the local ecology.

In addition to these government efforts, institutes, grassroots workers and locals also play a role in the ecological conservation of Sanjiangyuan.

Jamwang Phuntsog works at the public security bureau of Zhidoi county, Qinghai's Yushu Tibetan autonomous prefecture, through which the Yangtze River flows. In 2010, he set up an environmental protection volunteer team to pick up garbage in Sanjiangyuan during his spare time, together with volunteers from other professions.

The Shan Shui Conservation Center, an organization focused on nature conservation, cooperated with herder cooperatives to organize snow leopard observation in the source region of the Lancang River. This has not only increased the incomes of the herders, but also boosted ecological protection.

The success of China's national parks thus far has been in large part due to efforts involving local communities in the protection of wildlife and habitats. The completion of the national parks project by 2035 will see a massive expansion of such community involvement, according to analysts.

Integrating with growth

Li Chunliang, deputy director of the National Forestry and Grassland Administration, describes the release of the new spatial layout plan as another landmark achievement in the development of China's national park network. Li says that it is of great significance in guiding the high-quality development of national parks and building the world's largest national park system.

The parks envisaged in the plan will feature various ecosystems, spanning from forests and grasslands, to wetlands and deserts, involving more than 700 existing nature reserves, as well as 10 world natural heritage sites.

The plan also states that local residents and the public will be directly involved in the protection, construction and management of national parks through franchising, voluntary service and ecological protection positions, to enjoy the ecological benefits brought by national parks.

The power of national parks to simultaneously benefit nature and the human population can be seen clearly in the case of Sanjiangyuan National Park, where local communities have profited both directly and indirectly from the conservation efforts.

According to official statistics, over the past decade, water conservation in the Sanjiangyuan area has risen by more than 6 percent on average each year, while grassland coverage has increased by over 11 percent and grass output increased by 30 percent.

The populations of wild animals and plants have continued to increase in the Sanjiangyuan area. The population of Tibetan antelopes — a species under first-class national protection in China — in Hoh Xil has increased from less than 20,000 in the 1990s to over 70,000.

Meanwhile, each herder household living inside the Sanjiangyuan National Park has been offered a job opportunity as a ranger with an annual income of over 21,000 yuan. Currently, more than 17,000 rangers work in the park.

Jamwang Phuntsog's environment protection volunteer team has been enlarged to include more than 90 members, most of whom are herders.

"I am a guardian of grassroots green culture. Nowadays, the local scenery of green mountains, grass and flowing water reminds me of my childhood," says Jamwang Phuntsog.

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Top: Angsai valley in Sanjiangyuan National Park, Yushu Tibetan autonomous prefecture, Qinghai province. **Above:** The first turn of Yangtze River in Yushu prefecture, Qinghai. **Below:** Gyaring Lake in Sanjiangyuan National Park in Madoi county, Qinghai's Golog Tibetan autonomous prefecture.
PHOTOS BY LYU XUELI / XINHUA

Ethnic village in South China finds prosperity in tourism

NANNING — On an early winter morning, as roosters crow to greet the dawn, and a wisp of smoke rises above the farmhouse roof, villagers in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region have started a busy day ahead of Spring Festival.

"We've kept a running list of deals and ingredients for the big dinner on Lunar New Year's Eve," says 32-year-old Pan Zaoxiang in Longji township.

Dressed in her holiday best, the traditional clothing of the Yao ethnic group, Pan was born and raised in Dazhai village, located in the core area of the famous tourist attraction of Longji Rice Terraces.

The hamlet has been named among the Best Tourism Villages of 2022 by the United Nations World Tourism Organization for its breathtaking agricultural view, but Pan says that they used to struggle to make ends meet.

Deep in mountains, Dazhai village was very hard to get to, with only one narrow mud path zigzagging down the hills. Daily necessities and products for farm work could only be delivered by cart.

> "I have prepared an abundance of local cuisine and specialties ... to welcome tourists."
>
> **Pan Zaoxiang,** villager

"When I was a child, I longed for the outside world, but it usually took a day and a night to reach the nearest town on foot," says Pan.

Facing the harsh living conditions and the deteriorating ecological environment, the Dazhai villagers turned to the mountains and the massive amount of land reclaimed by previous generations.

By cooperating with tourism companies from Guilin, a popular city among travelers to the region, villagers became stakeholders in developing the land into a unique terraced landscape.

"My family plants nearly 10,000 *mu* (667 hectares) of rice on the terraced fields, and that means a year-end bonus of over 10,000 yuan ($1,475)," Pan says, adding that they all maintain the traditional ethnic architecture.

Villagers like Pan also sniffed out the growing business opportunities in catering and accommodation as more visitors poured in.

During this year's Spring Festival, around 230 homestays across the village are expected to be fully booked, says Yu Qiongtong, Party chief of Dazhai village.

Celebrations and various kinds of activities will also be held to present the rich history of the Yao ethnic group. Tourists from home and abroad have great interest not only in the beautiful landscape, but also the culture, says Pan.

"I have prepared an abundance of local cuisine and specialties, such as sausages, chilies and sticky rice in bamboo, to welcome tourists during Spring Festival," Pan says.

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LIFE

New frontier for cultural industry

Forum on the key sector highlights innovative use of modern technology, **Li Yingxue** reports.

The 20th Forum on International Cultural Industries in China recently gathered policymakers, researchers and industry insiders to deliver an overview of the development of the cultural industry in 2022 and examine future trends and vitality of the sector.

The forum, over Jan 7-8 in Beijing, focused on the Chinese path to modernization and new successes in developing a socialist culture.

Ten events in six categories were held, including the main forum, theme discussion, summit on creative management and think tank dialogues. The forum was hosted by Peking University and organized by its School of Arts and Institute for Cultural Industries.

Sun Qingwei, vice-president of Peking University, said he hoped it would continue to track and analyze the development of Chinese cultural industry, and provide new voices, experiences and thinking for socialist cultural construction.

Seven Chinese and foreign participants from the field of culture delivered keynote speeches and discussed patterns in quality development of the cultural industry, urban construction, emerging industries and cultural confidence.

Liu Yuzhu, head of China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation said the present prosperity of China's cultural market is unprecedented, and the main reason is people's demand for culture and support and promotion from the Party and government.

"The cultural industry, with its content-based nature, is an industry that everyone can participate in," Liu said. "There are tourism projects worth billions of yuan and movies and TV series costing tens of millions of yuan in the industry."

Even individuals can run WeChat accounts on cultural items or themes, he said.

Liu said content is at the core and technology will support the development of the industry and content creators should endeavor to make quality content.

Li Xiangmin, vice-president of Nanjing University of the Arts, pointed out that the Industrial Revolution not only started the industrialization of human society, but also brought a dramatic social change, in which modernization emerged.

> "The recovery of the cultural industry in the post-pandemic era will accelerate and give rise to new vitality."
>
> **Xiang Yong,** Peking University professor

"There is not one paradigm for the modernization of human society," Li said, emphasizing that the Chinese path to modernization is both a practice and the manifestation of cultural self-confidence.

Shahbaz Khan, director of the UNESCO Beijing Office, said the diverse manifestations of culture are enriching lives in countless ways. "Culture and creativity are increasingly seen as sustainable, renewable and omnipresent resources," he said.

Xiang Yong, head of the Institute for Cultural Industries, Peking University, said the Chinese path to modernization is one in which people's spiritual and cultural lives are enriched.

"We need not only promote self-improvement and self-confidence and develop cultural undertakings and industries but also enhance the influence of Chinese civilization," Xiang said.

Xiang shared his thoughts on trends in the industry. He mentioned 10 key terms of the industry in 2022 that included "metaverse cultural industry, immersive cultural tourism experience, digital empowerment of rural vitalization, artificial intelligence and ice-snow industry".

He predicted that in 2023 the digitalization of China's cultural industry will enter a new stage and give rise to new opportunities, virtualization and intelligence development, with "metaverse" moving mainstream.

"The recovery of the cultural industry in the post-pandemic era will accelerate and give rise to new vitality, and the cultural industry will continue to contribute to the vigorous development of rural vitalization," he said.

The main forum was broadcast live on different platforms, including Sina Weibo, Bilibili, Douyin and WeChat, and was watched over 1.25 million times by audiences across the country who interacted online.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the forum, which aims to provide insights into the progress of China's cultural industry through the intersection of academic thinking and practical innovation.

A short film on the forum's 20 years was released during the opening ceremony.

"Metaverse" was a major topic during the two-day event. The Institute for Cultural Industries launched a report on the "modern expression of Chinese culture" via the technology during the forum.

Xiang delivered the report that systematically elaborates on the main technical aspects, expression paths and application of scenarios of cultural DNA "empowered by meta universe".

Chen Shaofeng, head of the academic board at the Institute for Cultural Industries, said the industry's development has been through three historical stages, from media-based and internet-based to the current technology-based.

"The feature of the 'metaverse' cultural industry is the integration of humanistic and technological immersion and the combination of online and offline activities," Chen said, adding that the "metaverse" is "more asset-light or technology-driven experience".

Chen said the main aspect of the "meta universe", which is a core concept of digital economy in a specific industrial field and application scenario, is cross-industry integration.

He added that new features of the business model included the demand for skilled workers, an increase in the proportion of digital technology and the coexistence of business opportunities and challenges in the copyright industry.

Ma Ke, CEO of AiHuaShen Technology Beijing, a company focused on "metaverse" digital integration marketing, said the emergence of the approach provided a wide space for the production, dissemination and application scenarios of digital culture.

He said "metaverse" can be applied in various cultural fields such as intangible cultural heritage, scenic areas, cultural relics, rural culture and festivals.

"We are looking forward to using 'metaverse' to bring new stories, experiences and consumption, and using technology to empower culture, and meanwhile using culture to give value to technology," Ma said.

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Forum participants discussed the development of the cultural industry, including the "metaverse", city construction and cultural confidence. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Renowned orchestra deepens relationship

PHILADELPHIA, Pennsylvania — The Philadelphia Orchestra will enhance its ties with China through more in-person events to contribute to the development of US-China cultural exchanges, the orchestra's chief said.

"China is fundamentally important in terms of our international touring profile," Matias Tarnopolsky, president and CEO of the Philadelphia Orchestra, said in a recent interview.

The orchestra, which is based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has made "an incredible number of visits" to China, and has strengthened its connection with the people, audiences, and education and civic institutions in China, he said.

Despite the COVID challenges over the past three years, the orchestra was able to keep the relationship "not only going but developing" through a variety of digital collaborations, according to Tarnopolsky.

"Now we can go back and do it in person, and that's very important for us and for our partners in China as well," he said, adding that "as soon as the situation with COVID settles down, we'll be able to start planning future tours".

Founded in 1900, the orchestra is renowned for a long and distinguished history of touring the world. The orchestra's lasting ties with China mark a significant chapter in its century-old history.

In 1973, the orchestra pioneered cultural exchanges with China at the invitation by then US President Richard Nixon, becoming the first American orchestra to make a tour to the People's Republic of China.

Over the past 50 years, the orchestra has returned to China 12 times, more than any other US orchestra.

"Cultural exchange is fundamentally important as a path to understanding between peoples," said Tarnopolsky.

Last week, the Philadelphia Orchestra teamed up with iSING! Suzhou International Young Artists Festival, presenting concerts that featured ancient Chinese poetry both in Philadelphia and New York to celebrate the upcoming Chinese Lunar New Year.

Entitled *Echoes of Ancient Tang Poems*, the show was also held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the orchestra's first visit to China.

"Music connects us all, be it across geographic boundaries, languages, cultures and centuries," said Tarnopolsky, adding that in 2023, the orchestra will have a series of events to celebrate the milestone.

Valuing the orchestra's half-century bond with China, Tarnopolsky said he hopes to see the relationship continue to grow and flourish.

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From left: Liu Li, principal of the Beijing Language and Culture University, Sinologists Karim Alwadi, Carsten Boyer Thogersen and Fred Engst speak at the launch ceremony of the World Sinology Lecture program in Beijing on Jan 10. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Lecture program kicks off

China experts from nine countries participate in a symposium on the Chinese path to modernization, **Fang Aiqing** reports.

The Chinese path to modernization has epochal significance around the world, according to Alexey N. Aleksakhin, professor of the department of Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian and Thai languages at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Russia.

He was attending the launch ceremony of the World Sinology Lecture in Beijing on Jan 10, and, together with scholars from nine countries, giving an address on "why China's modernization matters to our times".

In the coming year, the World Sinology Lecture program will invite China experts from various cultural backgrounds to a monthly symposium discussing topics such as economics, politics, culture, society and ecological civilization, among others, according to Liu Hongcai, deputy head of the Chinese Association for International Understanding, one of the organizers.

Aleksakhin said that the connotations of China's path to modernization, as a key word in the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October, help to understand China's future under the leadership of the CPC, and that China's modernization pursues the coordination of the material and spiritual sides of civilization, and promotes people's all-around development, while continuously improving their living conditions.

China's achievements in developing a social economy and culture provide precious references for other countries, including Russia, he noted.

In his speech, Aleksakhin spoke of the first Chinese emperor Qinshihuang, founder of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), who unified not only the territory of the country, but also its written language, which laid the foundation of the nation's profound cultural traditions.

For a long time, the complex writing system was accessible only to a limited, elite section of society. However, the invention of pinyin, promoted by modern Chinese leaders and linguists, which enables Chinese to be spelled out in the Roman alphabet, made it much easier for ordinary people to master the language.

Participants at the launch ceremony of the World Sinology Lecture program themed on "why and how China's modernization matters to our times". PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

> "Sinology today has brand-new characteristics and a mission that attaches greater importance to realistic solicitude and frontier thinking."
>
> **Liu Li,** principal, Beijing Language and Culture University

With the assistance of the phonetic transcriptions, the generally speaking ideographic writing system has guaranteed language unification, technological advancement and further development of the socialist culture. Pinyin also facilitated the transition of the Chinese language from traditional media to electronic communication, Aleksakhin says.

Zhang Xiping, editor-in-chief of the academic journal International Sinology, added that this example proves Chinese culture has been formed and developed through continuous exchanges with the outside world.

It is through the process of mutual learning among civilizations that the nation has formed today's language and cultural systems, he said.

Carsten Boyer Thogersen, former consul general of Denmark in Shanghai, looked at "harmony in diversity", a notion put forward by the great thinker Confucius (551-479 BC) and much emphasized by the Chinese through the ages, comparing it to musical chords that sound beautiful at multiple pitches.

He said that development is based on diversity with inclusiveness, rather than a compromise or an average drawn upon individuals, and he hopes the West will learn more about Chinese culture and history.

Fred Engst, a professor at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, who is an American born and raised in China, recalled his early life in the country and pointed out that development with independence and autonomy is a key impetus for China's rise and its opening-up.

Karim Alwadi, Syrian entrepreneur and a member of the Aspen Global Leadership Network, based in Washington, D.C., offered suggestions for the strengthening of Sino-Arab cooperation, including building more communication mechanisms for high-ranking officials and direct contact of top entrepreneurs from the two sides. He also pointed out China's potential in areas like supply chains and financing in the Arab world.

Rashad Karimov, chief adviser to the director-general of the Port of Baku, Azerbaijan, said that, while the ancient Silk Road used to link the two distant countries closely, the current Belt and Road Initiative has ushered in new opportunities in trade, transportation, logistics, communication, investment, cultural exchanges, and many other sectors, for the countries and regions involved.

According to Karimov, many Chinese products, such as mobile phones, are popular with the people of Azerbaijan and, with their high quality, trendy looks and fair price, have become an essential part of people's daily lives.

Colin Mackerras, Sinologist and professor emeritus at the Griffith University in Australia, said he believes the BRI can bring peace and development to the world in the coming decades, and has the potential to help realize Eurasian solidarity.

Li Yonghui, a professor of international relations at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, when commenting on some of the speeches, said that it is inspiring that the Sinologists look at China's modernization from a larger perspective of human civilization, and with a cultural and historical depth.

"Facing the momentous changes unseen in a century, Sinology today has brand-new characteristics and a mission that attaches greater importance to realistic solicitude and frontier thinking," said Liu Li, principal of the Beijing Language and Culture University, co-organizer of the World Sinology Lecture program.

"We'll constantly provide intellectual support for national and regional development based on the construction of both a community for the Chinese nation and a human community with a shared future," he said.

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Court in session down under, but love means nothing

A. Thomas Pasek
Second Thoughts

The winter of our discontent has been taunting us here in North China with the mercury dipping daily below zero with no fluffy stuff to show for the shivering. Tantalizingly close are recent news clips showing tourists atop Bactrians huddled against deep desert snows in Dunhuang, portions of the Great Wall beckoning visitors with frigid fresh white layers and children skittering across a frozen lake in the nearby Chengde mountain resort, which in imperial times, oddly enough, was a highly coveted getaway destination for members of the royal court seeking cooler climes in summer months.

But let not the frozen capital's snowless streets chill our spirit, despite news of our nearby neighbors frolicking in the white stuff.

I would say look south to warm your soul, very far south — Australia to be precise.

In fact, Australia, being in the southern hemisphere, is so far south their birds fly "north" for the winter, a season which is of course half a year ahead, or behind, Beijing's.

On Monday, the year's first of four grand slam tennis events got underway down under.

Although, "love" means absolutely nothing in tennis, the number 10 should mean a lot to Chinese tennis fans this time around.

That's because no fewer than seven ladies and three gentlemen from across China were in the main draw of the Grand Slam event in Melbourne. That's a three-fold record — the most Chinese women, Chinese men, and Chinese players overall in any major tennis event ever.

And the funny thing is, it almost ended up being 11, but, unfortunately, the day after Christmas, 30-year-young Wang Qiang of Tianjin withdrew from the Aussie hard court championships due to a bum shoulder.

Pundits have come to occasionally speak of the current century, already nearly a quarter through, as being the Chinese Century. That remains to be seen, but tennis fans in the land of Li Na, the gregarious Wuhan-born winner of both the 2011 French Open and the 2014 Australian Open, are hoping that a Chinese player — male or female — will be the first to lay claim to such coveted silverware in nearly a decade, (and make 2023 the year of China, at least as far as tennis is concerned). In fact, Li was the first and only Chinese player to win a slam. After so many years, she would certainly appreciate some company from her homeland, because it can get a bit lonely at the top sometimes, product endorsements notwithstanding.

I'm more bullish on the Chinese ladies' chances in Victoria, mainly because there are seven of them, but also because of one baseline cannon of a rookie in the form of Zheng Qinwen, just 20. The Hubei province native was last ranked 30th by the Women's Tennis Association, but she managed to land a 29 seed in Australia, and beat Hungary's Dalma Galfi, 86 seed, in her first round battle.

The hard-hitting Zheng will definitely be hoping to outdo her first slam event, last year's Australian Open, where she bowed out in the second round.

I first remember seeing Zheng dismantle former No 1 Simona Halep about a year ago, a match which saw the Romanian start strong, and then suffer a panic attack — by her own admission — to lose to the teenaged Chinese phenom.

Then, shortly after, I saw her (on TV of course) blow away veteran Alize Cornet 6-0, only to have the Frenchwoman suddenly develop muscle discomfort and retire after the first set bagel.

Zheng has sometimes been criticized for failing to maintain consistent mental toughness and a killer spirit for the duration of the match. Zheng, who was recently named WTA's "newcomer of the year" of 2022, is also making her fans worry about her physical health, as she pulled out of a warm-up tourney in Adelaide on Jan 11, citing thigh soreness.

Zheng's six female compatriots joining her in Australia are: No 24 Zhang Shuai, No 49 Wang Xiyu, Lin Zhu, Wang Xinyu, Yue Yuan and Zheng Saisai.

So why am I more jacked on No 29 Zheng over No 24 Zhang? Two things: age and agility. Zheng's legs are only 20, 13 years behind Zhang's, so at the risk of sounding a bit ageist, my money's on the young, nearly 1.8 meter-tall Zheng.

Also, Shenzhen's Wang Xinyu has given some top seeds some headaches of late. She's only a year older than Zheng, so look for Wang to be a regular presence for the next decade or two after also winning her first-round matchup a year ago.

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Villagers in Hebei make moves to enjoy better lifestyle

SHIJIAZHUANG — In 2019, Gao Yun was relocated out of a largely empty village in the city of Zhangjiakou in North China's Hebei province, and his quality of life has since improved significantly.

When Gao left Xiangxinggou village in Zhangjiakou's Zhangbei county, only fewer than 20 families were still living there, and 70 percent of the village houses were not in use.

Today he lives in a two-story house in a new community, which was jointly developed by Xiangxinggou and the neighboring village of Houdayingtan for relocated households.

Life now is quite comfortable, Gao says. "I gave up an adobe house and in exchange, I got a modern home. Instead of the dirt road in the old village, now we have concrete roads. I no longer need to leave the house to take a bath or go to the toilet, and there is central heating for winter."

Xiangxinggou is one of more than 1,000 "hollow" villages across Zhangjiakou that have undergone a transformation in the past five years or so.

Over the years, Zhangjiakou, a city with bitter cold winters, has seen a large number of young people move out to seek employment elsewhere, leaving many villages gradually hollowed out.

Of the city's over 4,170 administrative villages, 924 reported more than 50 percent of their rural residences unused, while 169 others reported 30 to 50 percent unused, according to official data.

Much of the land in these sparsely populated villages had been left idle, and people were plagued by poor public services.

Since 2017, Zhangjiakou has begun to give these "hollow" villages a shake-up, either by relocating the remaining residents or renovating the villages.

The wishes of the villagers have been fully respected during the process, says Li Pengju, Party chief of Zhangbei county. "Whether to move, how to move and where to move — it was their call."

Shuiquan village was one of the villages that chose renovation over relocation.

Following the demolition of dilapidated houses and the removal of debris, the formerly run-down village, with a history of more than 800 years, has been transformed into a model of rural tourism.

Zhangjiakou has so far built 155 new communities for relocated villagers, housing 135,000 people. The city has also established many supporting facilities, including kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, hospitals, service centers and elderly care institutions.

One of the communities, located near Zhangbei's downtown area, has provided a new home to more than 16,000 people from 80 administrative villages.

Meanwhile, the city has made the reemployment of relocated villagers an integral part of the transformation program, and built more than 110 industrial parks near the new communities.

These industrial parks accommodate a vast array of businesses, such as garment manufacturing and agricultural product processing, and continue to generate employment opportunities as they expand.

A total of 26 clothes processing and agricultural products projects in Zhangbei county, for example, have created more than 6,800 jobs, and 24 plantations, breeding gardens and photovoltaic industrial parks in Guyuan county have employed over 1,000 people.

Wang Jinrong and his wife are now packers at a quinoa-processing plant in one of Guyuan's industrial parks.

Before moving into a new community near the plant, they engaged in the cultivation of "naked" oats in a 0.8 hectare field in Guyuan's Xinhua village and struggled financially. Now the couple can jointly earn nearly 6,000 yuan ($859.48) every month.

Wang says that a majority of the factory workers were relocated to the community from nearby villages.

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