

CHINA REPORT

POLITICS

Delivering the Goods:
The logistics of keeping
lorries on the road

ECONOMY

Blocked Berths:
Shipping struggles with
crew, port restrictions



SEEKING OFFICE

As China's employment landscape changes, there is
more competition for coveted white-collar jobs



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World Tourism Organization

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Published by China News Service
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ISSN 2053-0463

China needs to be creative in increasing the overall coverage of its pension system

On April 21, the Chinese government announced the creation of a private pension scheme to allow Chinese employees to invest and supplement funds in their pension accounts. It is considered a landmark move for China to tackle its rapidly ageing population.

However, under the current policy arrangement, the impact of an individual pension scheme may be limited. For a long time, China rested on three fundamental tenets to build a robust pension system, namely: a government-run basic pension scheme, enterprise-run annuity schemes and individual private pension schemes.

China established a State-run basic pension system in 1997. According to data released by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the State-run pension fund now pays out an average monthly pension of 2,900 yuan (US\$427). With an average pension replacement rate of 43.6 percent, it covers 426 million people, or about 30 percent of China's total population.

Compared to the State-run pension fund, the coverage of the enterprise-run annuity schemes lags far behind. As of the end of the third quarter of 2021, the enterprise-run annuity schemes, which exists mostly among State-owned enterprises, only covered 28.37 million people, or about 5.6 percent of those covered by the State state-run basic pension fund.

A major reason is that the employer contribution rate to the State-run pension fund is already quite high (16 percent) and many enterprises lack the incentive to offer pension benefits to their employees. Big, profitable enterprises prefer to use salary and equity incentive plans to attract talent. For small- and medium-sized enterprises, with their relatively low revenue and short lifespans, it is already difficult to comply with the mandatory pension contribution under the State-run system.

Participants in personal pension schemes would mostly be those already covered by the State-run pension fund and/or the enterprise annuity

programmes. It means that while the private scheme may increase the pension replacement rate for people already covered by existing schemes, it will do little to promote overall pension coverage across the whole population. As those already covered can benefit further from tax deductions under the private pension scheme, it may actually further increase the inequality of pension benefits between groups.

Therefore, in designing personal pension schemes, the government must seek to make innovative arrangements to expand the overall coverage of pension benefits. For example, the government should make the housing fund transferable to pension funds. Currently, an employee can only use their housing fund to buy or rent a flat. By allowing it to be transferable to pension funds, it could better utilise the fund and increase the pension replacement rate. The government should also streamline and digitalise the administration of enterprise-run annuity schemes, to reduce the administrative barriers for enterprises to join schemes.

Most importantly, the authorities should strive to encourage small and micro businesses to join pension schemes. They should be allowed to contribute to the State-run pension scheme at a lower rate, rather than the rigid 16-percent contribution rate, and to suspend contributions under certain conditions. Their employees should be allowed to obtain pension benefits from multiple employers, so part-time and flexible workers can have access to pension benefits.

As for enterprise-run annuity programmes and private pension schemes, they can be consolidated into an individual pension account, and employers in small and micro businesses can make flexible arrangements to make contributions to the accounts of their employees. After all, to tackle China's ageing population, it is as important, if not more so, to grant more people access to pension benefits of any sort, as to increase the pension replacement rate of those already covered by existing programmes. ★

In designing personal pension schemes, the government must seek to make innovative arrangements to expand the overall coverage of pension benefits

CROWDED MARKET

The current crop of graduates are finding it harder than ever to find a job that fits their qualifications



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Photo by CFP

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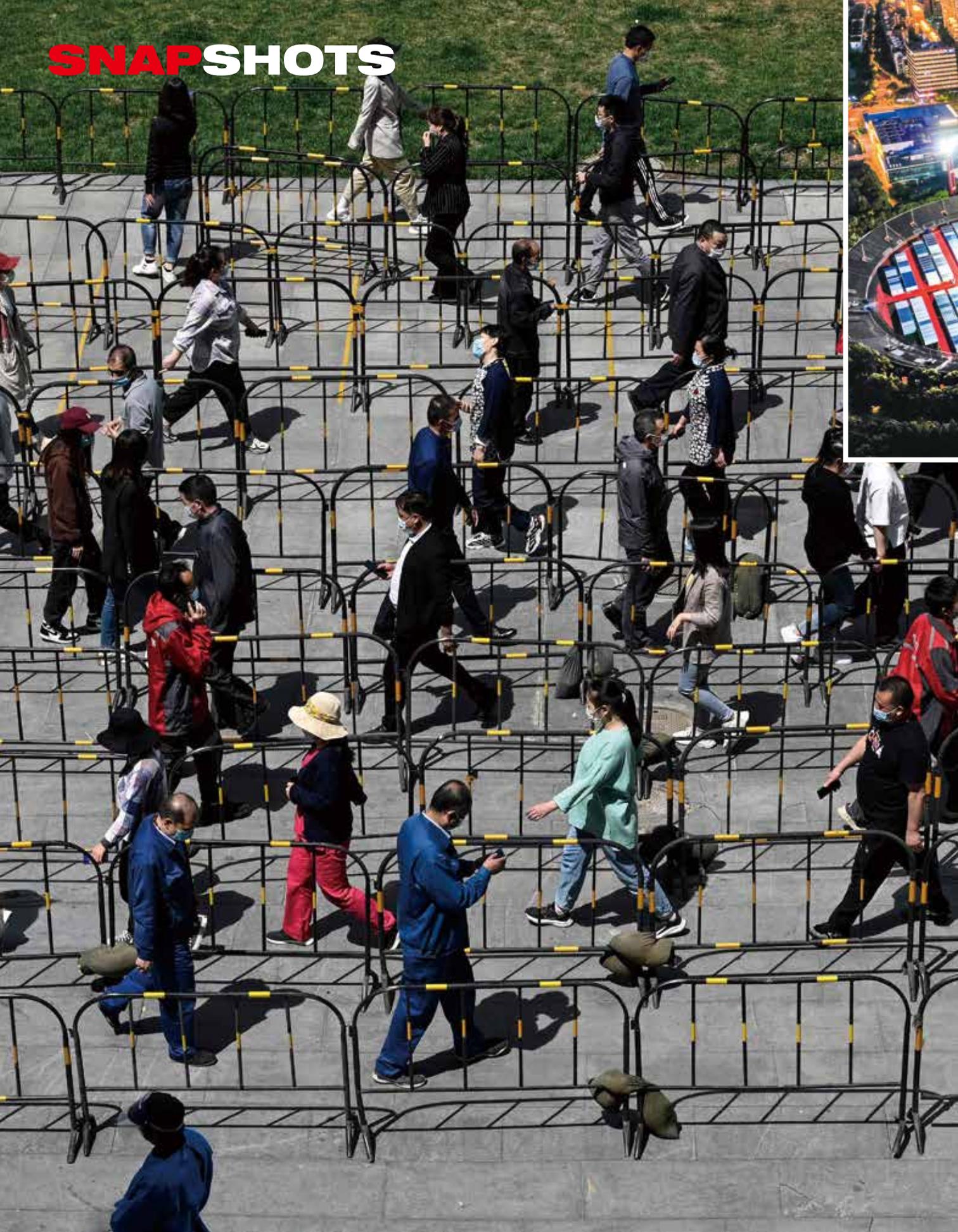
64 **FLAVOUR OF THE MONTH/REAL CHINESE**



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SNAPSHOTS





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1. Inside the Jiangwan Stadium, Yangpu District, Shanghai, a centralised isolation site is completed on May 9, with 1,100 isolation rooms and 1,800 beds for close contacts of confirmed cases of Covid-19 (Photo by VCG)
2. People take selfies in front of Wukang Mansion (or Normandie Apartments), a famous historic building in the Former French Concession, at Wukang Road in Shanghai, which was recently lifted from lockdown, May 18. Some residents in areas of Shanghai where there have been no new case in the previous 14 days have been allowed to leave their residential compounds since mid-May. (Photo by The Paper)
3. Beijing residents queue up for Covid-19 nucleic acid testing, Zhongguancun, Beijing, April 26 (Photo by VCG)
4. A husky pops its face out of a hole at a quarantine venue for pets in Shanghai, May 17. On May 17, 18 pets, whose owners had tested positive to COVID-19 affected or were close contacts, were reunited with their owners (Photo by VCG)



1. A face fragment from a clay Buddha statue from the Northern Wei Dynasty (493-534) is displayed at the Luoyang Museum, Luoyang, Henan Province, May 16. One of the most famous cultural relics in China, this clay Buddha fragment is distinguished by its warm smile (Photo by VCG)

2. A teenager poses in front of a giant astronaut model at an astronomy-themed immersive exhibition called "Boundless," Chengdu Jinghua Wanda Plaza, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, May 14 (Photo by VCG)

3. A woman is rescued from a collapsed building, Wangcheng District, Changsha, Hunan Province, May 1. The incident, which occurred on April 29, killed 53 people, while 10 were rescued (Photo by VCG)

4. Dozens of swimmers swim in the Yangtze River, Jiangjin District, Chongqing, April 28 (Photo by VCG)





ChinaReport, Chinese Edition

May 2, 2022

Gaps in Orthodontist Provision



The frenetic pursuit of a perfect smile has triggered an overheated market where the number of professional orthodontists is far from enough. The number of clinical orthodontic cases almost doubled from 1.6 million in 2015 to 3.1 million in 2020 and the figure is expected to rise to 9.5 million in 2030. Compared to the growing demand, the country's 6,100 recognised orthodontists are insufficient to satisfy the market, leaving a great gap that is being tapped by retainer producers and dental clinics. But without properly trained professionals, many clinics and online producers are bringing more trouble than beauty to dental patients. Because of unscrupulous operations, many customers find their costly tooth correction only worsens their oral condition and forces them to seek corrective treatment in dental hospitals. Some companies also target children aged 3-5, who should not be undergoing orthodontic treatments.

Caijing Magazine

April 25, 2022

Auto Industry Hits the Brakes

The shortage of auto parts has imposed an unprecedented challenge to China's automobile industry whose retail sales may grow by zero this year. From March on, the Omicron wave caused widespread strict lockdowns in Shanghai and Jilin Province, two of the main auto parts manufacturing and distribution centres in the country. Meanwhile, price hikes of auto chips, batteries and raw materials forced manufacturers to increase sales prices for new vehicles. Even though some manufacturers resumed production in April, lack of staff and blocked logistics are causing problems. Starting in March 2020, the government adopted policies to boost the auto market, including tax rebates for purchasing new-energy vehicles, facilitating second-hand vehicle trading and relaxing restrictions on buying passenger vehicles. But rising auto prices and weakened expectations over household income will continue to make consumers hesitant to buy cars.

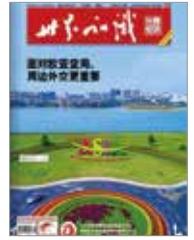


World Affairs

April 16, 2022

US Indo-Pacific Strategy Aiming to Shape China's Neighbouring Area

In February, the White House released its first "Indo-Pacific Strategy." Some Chinese analysts believe it shows the US's resolve to shift its strategic centre to the Indo-Pacific Region no matter what happens in other parts of the world. They remark that the Biden administration, unlike the previous Trump administration, pays much more attention to strengthening its ties not only with its treaty allies, but also with "leading regional partners." It will also build connectivity between the EU and the Indo-Pacific region. For China, the question is how important the Indo-Pacific region is in the US's new global strategy. And it is clear that the US is trying to shape China's neighbouring areas based on US interests and ideology in the following decade. China needs to win the hearts of its neighbours through better implementation of projects like the Belt&Road Initiative.

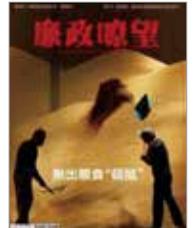


Honest Outlook

April 16, 2022

Ingrained Corruption over Crops

A nationwide anti-graft drive launched by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and National Supervisory Commission since August 2021 has exposed a spate of corruption cases surrounding grain sales, purchasing, transportation and storage. A number of officials were colluding to take advantage of supervisory loopholes. After buying crops at lower prices from farmers, the officials pretended to sell grain to the market on fabricated contracts before purchasing them again at higher prices under assured price schemes. They also played tricks on farmers by cutting purchase prices and lying to them that part of the crop did not meet quality standards, later selling it for themselves. They even sold reserved grain stocks at much higher prices. To fight against corruption, the State Council plans to reform the supervisory body and install AI technologies to monitor more than 900 granaries in the country.



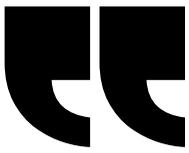
Nanfang People

April 4, 2022

Animation Comes of Age

Pixar Animation Studios' latest film *Turning Red* has won great accolades on Chinese social media platforms since its premiere in March on streaming platform Disney+, rated 8.2/10 on Douban, China's leading art review platform. Created by Chinese Canadian Domee Shi, an Oscar winner for her animation short film *Bao* in 2018, *Turning Red* explores ethnic and gender differences centered on the conflict and reconciliation between 13-year-old girl Mei from an ethnic Chinese family in Canada who transforms into a red panda. The transformation represents the puberty, the awakening of the power of women and the fear of the awakening. Unlike her mother who gives up her own dreams to meet the expectations of her family, Mei decides to be herself. It is an affirming coming-of-age moment.





WHAT THEY SAY

“We have an array of indexes to measure whether we will put an end to the pandemic, and the case fatality rate for at-risk populations like the elderly and chronically ill will always be a very critical one.”

Zhang Wenhong, director of China’s Centre for Infectious Diseases, at the annual Boao Forum For Asia held in Hainan Province from April 20 to 22

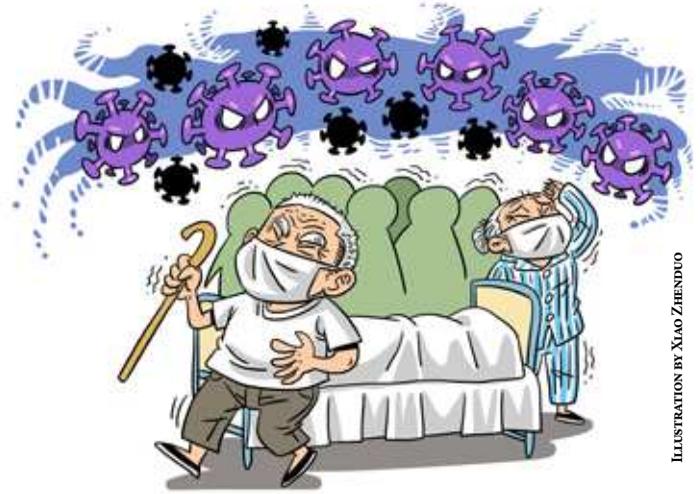


ILLUSTRATION BY XIAO ZHENDUO



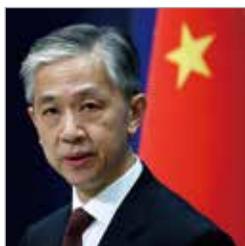
“Strategically speaking, promoting win-win agricultural cooperation will not only improve the variety of food supply for the Chinese people and increase the income of American farmers, but also make [the] global food supply more stable and certain, and contribute to [the] global fight against climate change.”

Qin Gang, Chinese ambassador to the US, at the 2022 China-US High-level Agricultural Dialogue held in Des Moines, Iowa on April 22



“Hope always emerges in times of despair, even desperation, calling us to rally and forge ahead.”

Mo Yan, winner of the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature, in an open letter to China’s youth on Youth Day (May 4) titled “Don’t Let the Wind Blow You Down”



“Terrorism is the common enemy of mankind. The blood of the Chinese citizens shall not be shed in vain. China firmly supports Pakistan’s counter-terrorism efforts. We will work with Pakistan to hunt down the perpetrators and make sure they are brought to justice and pay a heavy price.”

Wang Wenbin, spokesperson of China’s Foreign Ministry, at a press conference following a terrorist attack on a van from the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi that killed three Chinese teachers and a Pakistani driver on April 26



“I am 18, right? I haven’t even started college yet. I’m fresh out of high school. And people are trying to make me this geopolitical figure. I don’t have the power to change two countries... I’m just trying to do what I can and a lot of things are out of my control...”

Gu Ailing Eileen, freestyle skier and three-time medalist at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, at the ESPN W (Women + Sports) Summit held in New York on May 4

“China and Europe are the most stable powers in the world ... Facing a fast-changing situation unprecedented in the past century, cooperation between China and Europe is of great importance. If Europe is misled by the US and gets trapped into a so-called new Cold War narrative, the world will become even more dangerous.”

Wang Yiwei, director of the Centre for EU Studies at the Renmin University of China in Beijing, in an interview with China News Service on April 29

“The pandemic’s influence on the economy is no less than in early 2020 when the Covid-19 virus first hit China... We should not underestimate the pressure of the economic slowdown or overestimate the efficiency of traditional loose stimulus policies.”

Lu Ting, chief economist at Nomura Securities, at the monthly China Macroeconomy Forum in April

“I would like to reiterate that the people of China and the US always have friendly feelings towards each other. The friendship between the two peoples has always been the endless source of strength and an important foundation for the development of bilateral relations... The anti-China forces, driven by ideological bias and selfish political interests, flagrantly provoked confrontation and division, disseminated political viruses, and poisoned the public opinion atmosphere in both countries.”

Zhao Lijian, spokesperson of China’s Foreign Ministry, responding to a Pew Research Centre survey which showed that 80 percent of surveyed Americans have unfriendly views towards China, at a regular press conference on April 29

“Entrepreneurs have many concerns and anxieties and generally do not have much confidence [in the future], which I think will be the greatest influence on China’s economic development, even more than US sanctions.”

Chinese economist **Xiang Songzuo** in an April interview for Z.H. Island, a networking platform for entrepreneurs



Top Story Foreign Investors still Confident in China's Economic Development

Despite the severe Covid-19 pandemic in Shanghai, a number of international asset management firms are applying to a pilot programme for QFLP (Qualified Foreign Limited Partner) and QDLP (Qualified Domestic Limited Partner) status.

QFLP enables approved foreign investors to invest in China's domestic private equity and venture capital market after they exchange foreign capital into Chinese yuan, and QDLP enables qualified Chinese fund investors to invest on the international market.

Four firms, including Hamilton Lane based in the US, CCB International based in Hong Kong, CDH Investments based in Beijing and JAFCO Asia initially established in Singapore have been approved for QFLP, and BlackRock, the biggest listed asset management company in the US, and the Anzhong Investment under AZIMUT group, a leading European independent capital management company, have been approved for QDLP, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

Tang Xiaodong, director of BlackRock's China Branch, told Xinhua that the latest approval for QDLP will facilitate BlackRock to further introduce in experience in foreign investment and risk management and they hold a positive attitude towards the potential and flexibility of the Chinese



market in the long run.

Hu Ning, a partner in CDH Investments told Xinhua they applied for QFLP because they are optimistic about China's demand for long-term US dollar investment and they are attracted by Shanghai's high-level opening-up for cross-border investment.

Hu said he believes that China's real economy will continue its path of stable development and will play a role as a safe haven for assets in the global market.

Several other international asset management firms have applied for the pilot investment scheme to expand their business.

"Due to effective pandemic control, China has maintained normal production over the past two years and further enhanced its status in the global industrial chain. Although the new Covid-19 variants have brought about new challenges, we believe that China will find a dynamic balance

between pandemic control and economic development," Pan Ruiting, JAFCO Asia's general managing director and director of the China Branch, told Xinhua.

On April 29, China's politburo released a readout of their meeting, which said that government departments should actively respond to foreign enterprises' appeal for business facilitation in China and try their best to stabilise the foundation for foreign trade and investment.

The readout emphasised that China will continue to open to foreign investors and will further integrate into global trade and investment. It said that the country will minimise the influence on foreign enterprises due to enhanced logistics and transportation controls for the pandemic.

The latest data from China's Ministry of Commerce shows that China's actual use of foreign capital reached US\$74.5 billion from January to April despite the Omicron outbreak, 26.1 percent more than that in the same period of 2021.

Although China's economy was heavily impacted by the pandemic in April, the impact will not last long, National Bureau of Statistics spokesperson Fu Linghui said at a press conference on May 16.

Fu said that China will continue to roll-out measures to stabilise the economy while it works to control the pandemic.

Business

COMAC Passenger Jet Makes Maiden Flight from Shanghai

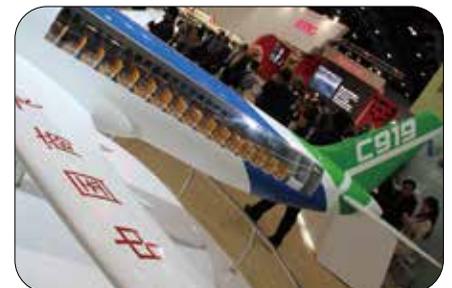
China's first domestically developed passenger plane the C919 successfully made its maiden flight on May 14 at Pudong International Airport in Shanghai.

According to the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), who designed the C919, the flight lasted more than three hours and focused on testing the plane's functions, manufacturing quality and safety.

Chinese aviation expert Wang Yanan told

China National Radio that the C919, a large single-aisle passenger aircraft, was developed based on international airworthiness standards and is of similar quality and function as the workhorse Airbus A320. It boasts an array of creative highlights in aerodynamic configuration and avionics.

The C919 sells at US\$99 million, much lower than the price of an A320neo or Boeing's B737MAX8. Chinese media said the plane has received around 850 orders



from 28 buyers at home and abroad.

COMAC projects that demand for narrow-body jetliners like the C919 in China will reach around 300 a year on average in the next two decades.

Medical

Sinopharm to Trial Omicron Vaccine

China National Biotech Group (CNBG) under the China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm) announced on April 27 that their new vaccine which targets Omicron variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been approved for clinical trials.

CNBG president Yang Xiaoming said at a press conference the same day that the company started development of a vaccine to target Omicron variants in December 2021 and tests already signal that the new vaccine has a good neutralising effect.

According to the Xinhua News Agency, trials started in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province on May 1. Those above 18 years old who have not been vaccinated before can apply for the trial on a voluntary basis. CNBG said it will also launch clinical research on booster shots for adults who have already received two or three shots.

According to *Health Times*, several domestically developed oral medications to treat Covid-19 are



already in clinical trials.

Phase III clinical trials showed that Azvudine, originally an anti-AIDS medicine developed by Genuine Biotech, is effective against both mild and severe symptoms of Covid-19.

Another medication, VV116 jointly developed by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Junshi Biosciences was approved for urgent clinical use in Uzbekistan in December 2021, where clinical tests showed it was able to relieve symptoms and greatly reduce the risk of developing serious symptoms or death.

Politics

Hong Kong Elects New Chief Executive

Former Hong Kong police officer Lee Ka Chiu John was elected as Hong Kong's sixth Chief Executive on May 8.

Born in Hong Kong in 1957, Lee worked in the Hong Kong Police Force for more than 30 years before he was appointed deputy director of Hong Kong's Security Bureau in 2012. The same year, Lee renounced his British citizenship. Lee was appointed director of the Security Bureau in 2017 and four years later, he became Chief Secretary for Administration of the Hong Kong government.

Lee overwhelmingly won more than 99 percent of

the votes which analysts believe should be attributed to Lee's contributions to Hong Kong's security, especially during the 2019 protests.

According to Lee's election pledges, his future work will focus on four aspects, including improving governance and concentrating more efforts in improving livelihoods, simplifying administrative processes and providing people with more affordable houses, increasing Hong Kong's overall competitiveness and making the development more sustainable, and building a more harmonious and integrated society where young people have more opportunities to advance.

Science

Team Sets Up World's Highest Weather Station on Mount Qomolangma

A Chinese scientific expedition set up an automatic meteorological station at an altitude of 8,800 metres above sea level on Mount Qomolangma (Everest) on May 4. It is the world's highest ground meteorological station.

Dubbed the world's "third pole" and the world's second biggest concentration of glaciers, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau plays a crucial role in China's ecological safety and storage of strategic resources. The expedition aims to get more information about

environmental changes on the plateau to improve ecological safety and promote the plateau's sustainable development.

The Chinese expedition also set up another seven stations between 5,200-8,800 metres in altitude which will be used to collect data for research on the effect of wind, climate change, greenhouse gases and how to adapt to extreme weather events, and especially how the high plateau will be influenced by a warming globe.

Society

Building Collapse Kills 53 People in Changsha

A building collapse killed 53 people in Changsha, Hunan Province on April 29, causing great public concern about illegally built or extended buildings.

The eight-storey building was built more than 10 years ago. Six floors were rented for commercial use, including shops, a restaurant, a cinema and a guest house. Two floors had rented flats.

Rescue efforts lasted a week and involved 23 fire engines, 134 firefighters and four sniffer dogs, with 10 people pulled alive from the rubble. The remains of the 53 victims have been found.

A preliminary investigation found the building's owner surnamed Wu and three others in charge of design and construction allegedly made illegal alterations. Police also detained several people from a surveying firm who allegedly issued a false safety certificate.

By May 4, Changsha had urgently examined more than 400,000 "self-built" constructions. On May 6, the State Council set up a team of experts in construction, security and law to investigate the cause of the collapse. The results have not yet been published.



Elderly Woman Sent to Morgue While Still Alive

Chinese social media was fuming after a Shanghai nursing home made a near-grave mistake by sending one of its residents to the morgue while she was still alive. In the uploaded video from May 1 shot by a bystander, nursing home staff in protective suits removed a yellow body bag containing the 75-year-old from a hearse after the mortician noticed it was moving. Putuo District authorities said the senior citizen was taken to hospital, and they have punished five people connected to the case. Caixin reported the nursing home lacked medical professionals because of cutbacks. The case has since triggered public discussions about the state of China's nursing homes, with many concerned that similar cases have occurred amid Shanghai's ongoing pandemic lockdown.



Foxconn Job Ads Hint at Labour Woes

Job ads released by Foxconn Zhengzhou Branch offering big signing bonuses and shuttle buses for new hires suggests Apple's largest assembler in China is struggling to recruit new workers. Foxconn said its "point-to-point employment" scheme to directly bus in employees from surrounding areas near Zhengzhou, Henan Province was launched in part because of pandemic controls. However, some interpret the move as a desperate attempt to attract young workers. Media reported Foxconn promised new employees a 6,500 yuan (US\$1,000) bonus after their first three months, which was later bumped to 8,000 yuan (US\$1,230). Analysts warned that the long hours and repetitive work of traditional manufacturing is increasingly putting off younger workers which could lead to labour shortages.

Nurses Fired Over Post About Late Paycheck Wins Damages

Authorities sided with a nurse surnamed Zhang who was fired after she posted on WeChat that she "envied people who get paid on time." Her employer, a health-care centre in Henan Province, also fired another nurse who liked Zhang's post. In a statement that Zhang reposted, the company accused her and coworker of libel. The company later told media that although they had fallen behind in payroll, the two employees were fired for poor performance. Zhang argued that she and her colleague have worked at the company for many years without incident. Lawyers said Zhang did not commit libel by telling a truth and her employer had violated China's labour laws. The local human resource bureau ordered the company to compensate the two nurses for wage arrears and other damages.

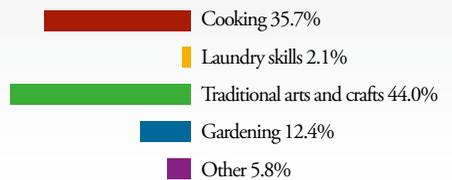
Deadbeat Dad Forced to Pay In-Laws

A court awarded an elderly couple 10 years in back child support for raising their granddaughter after her absent father refused to pay. Following the death of their daughter from cancer in 2012, the elderly couple in Quzhou, Zhejiang Province came to look after their granddaughter while the husband surnamed Jiang worked in another city. After a few months, however, Jiang stopped visiting and sending money, leaving the grandparents to struggle for the ten eight years. In 2020, the couple asked Jiang to support his daughter, but he refused, arguing they had volunteered to look after her. The court ordered Jiang to pay the grandparents 105,000 yuan (US\$15,500), as he was legally obligated to support his daughter.

Poll the People

China's Ministry of Education added work and life skills to the curriculum in early May, requiring that each elementary and middle school dedicate at least one hour a week. The newly added "labour class," according to the released document, comprises home economics, gardening and agriculture and more. The curriculum standard aims to foster independence and enable students to better integrate into society. Many parents supported the addition.

What would you want to learn in 'labour class'?



Source: *Caijing magazine*

Most Circulated Post

Reposted 1,080,356 times by May 15

"Go, young people, and make China a pioneering nation!"



Party newspaper the *People's Daily* marked China's Youth Day on May 4 with a video featuring TFBoys-turned-actor Jackson Yee and other young role models in areas such as sports, pandemic controls, aviation and public security, sharing their stories to encourage China's youth to keep striving to overcome the fears, difficulties and pressures they face. The video saw around 1.1 million reposts and over 11,000 comments as of May 15.

TOP FIVE SEARCH QUERIES

On  *for the week ending May 22*

1. Chinese Rival to Boeing, Airbus Completes Test Flight **4,942,070**

China's first domestically made commercial aircraft, the C919, completed a three-hour test flight in Shanghai on May 14. State-owned jet maker Commercial Aircraft Corp of China confirmed the US\$99 million plane will ship in 2022.

2. Shanghai Plans to Lift Lockdown in June **4,524,190**

Shanghai Deputy Mayor Zong Ming announced on May 16 that the local government plans to resume normal life and production in Shanghai in June as long as the risk of a rebound in infections is controlled.

3. China to Build Permanent Covid Testing Stations **4,771,136**

China's National Health Commission announced on May 13 that they plan to set up nucleic acid test stations within a 15-minute walk of each community in major cities to facilitate mass testing.

4. Xinhua Encourages Young Chinese Ahead of Youth Day **3,953,252**

To mark China's Youth Day on May 4, State-run Xinhua News Agency published an editorial encouraging young people in China to keep striving for the country and the people.

5. As Unemployment Rises, China Pledges to Stabilise Economy **2,173,073**

Heavily affected by Omicron outbreaks in April, China's CPI rose by 0.4 percent month-to-month and its unemployment rate rose by 0.3 percent, China's National Bureau of Statistics announced on May 16, adding the government will keep working to stabilise the economy.

TOP BLOGGER PROFILE

Liu Genghong

Followers: 3,852,000 by May 16, 2022

Since the 1990s, Liu Genghong has achieved minor celebrity as an actor, singer and fitness guru. But while the entertainment industry continues to suffer under Covid restrictions and major lockdowns, Liu unexpectedly catapulted his career in late April with his viral fitness videos. Within two weeks of his first post, Liu had 50 million followers on Douyin (China's TikTok) checking in to his fitness livestreams broadcast under lockdown from his Shanghai home, which also feature his wife, children and 66-year-old mother. It also helps that Liu, now 50,

once trained Taiwanese pop megastar Jay Chou – whose song “Herbalist’s Manual” saw a bump in popularity after Liu used it in one of his most popular videos. Many praised Liu for his easy-to-learn routines, energetic personality and constant encouragement to keep going. Although some people suspect that a marketing company is behind Liu’s recent rise, most said he is fulfilling demand for ways to keep fit while many people remain stuck indoors.



WHAT'S HOT?

WHAT'S NOT?



Organic Changes

Yue Wenwen's quest to provide organic vegetables for her ill daughter has been a bountiful success. The 37-year-old mother has acquired 27 patents in organic agriculture from her base in Wuhan, Hubei Province. Yue, who has a doctorate in management science and engineering, said she had never set foot on a farm until she was 32 years old. But when her young daughter was diagnosed with Kawasaki disease, a form of vasculitis, she vowed to feed her organic vegetables every day. After many detours and expert consultations, her farm now produces over 100 kinds of vegetables year-round. Yue has also branched out to agritourism.



To Teach a Predator

A delivery man said he paid over 10,000 yuan (US\$1,540) to learn how to meet women, only to find that the company was grooming men to be sexual predators. According to the *Cover News* report, many similar companies offer classes in sleazy pickup artist, teaching techniques on how to quickly establish trust and pose as wealthy men, providing them with fancy clothes and photos of luxury cars. The company even scoped out and surveilled potential targets with hidden cameras.



Web Celeb Nursing Home

When Fan Jinlin learned an elderly woman with six children could not afford space in one of his nursing homes, he got creative. The 25-year-old, who owns four adult care homes in Henan Province, invested 1.2 million yuan (US\$184,615) to provide a free nursing home that would turn its residents into social media celebs, monetising short videos about their daily lives to pay for the home's day-to-day operations. He even added a video gaming room for livestreams, saying many senior citizens are curious about what young people are playing. Many on social media said they hope more nursing homes try this approach.



Catfisher Gets Comeuppance

A romance scammer was sentenced to over 10 years in prison for conning an elderly victim out of 2.6 million yuan (US\$400,000). Media reported that the victim first met the con man surnamed Li in 2016 in a chat room, where he posed as a middle-aged woman who ran a cafe in the US. An online relationship developed, during which Li convinced the elderly man to transfer many sums for investments, medical bills, real estate woes and returning to China. He only became suspicious when Li refused to meet in person several times. Netizens said the case just further proves the internet-age adage – you never know who anyone really is online.

SOME OF THE IMAGES USED IN THIS SECTION ARE FROM THE INTERNET

Asia-Pacific Future

A Path for Sustained Prosperity

Against the backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions both outside and inside the region, the Asia-Pacific should establish itself as a model for peaceful and sustainable development

By Cui Hongjian



Japan's Ground Self-Defence Force conducts a joint amphibian drill with US Marines in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan, late March

The Asia-Pacific region has an important position in the world's economic and political landscape, primarily for two reasons. First, the Asia-Pacific region is emerging as a global economic, investment, industrial and innovation centre. The region's economic output now accounts

for more than 60 percent of the world's total, and the figure is still growing. More and more Asia-Pacific countries and regions are becoming major global economies. It is expected the region will attract more trade, investment and industry from all over the world, a result of four decades of rapid globalisation.

Second, the Asia-Pacific is becoming a critical region that could shape the global geopolitical landscape. As the region emerges to become the world's economic centre, it has attracted the attention of more players outside the region, which have exerted geopolitical pressure on regional countries. During the rapid globalisation of previous decades, Asia-Pacific countries seized the chance to achieve major economic development. As globalisation has encountered major setbacks amid rising geopolitical tension, the region faces a major challenge over whether it can handle geopolitical risks while continuing to maintain growth and prosperity. In order to do this, regional countries need to find solutions to two major issues.

The first question is how to handle the relationship between small and large countries within the region. In the process of globalisation, regional countries have minimised the impact of their strategic concerns through cooperating with each other on trade and investment and expanding the overall market for the entire region. But as strategic tensions intensify, the relationships between small and large countries are key to whether the region continues to enjoy peace and prosperity.

The second question is how regional countries will handle the tension between maintaining political inclusiveness and the grouping and institutionalisation of security

relations. The geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific region has been fragmented. Traditionally, the indigenous political and security mechanism in the region is diverse and inclusive. But lately, the US and its allies outside the region have pushed political and security arrangements aimed to group regional countries into exclusive military alliances, which contradicts the political tradition of the region and caused rising tensions. For Asia-Pacific countries, what is happening in Europe provides a warning against the possibility of two different directions leading to conflicts or confrontations. While these alliances, such as AUKUS, are still in their infancy, regional countries must think carefully about what kind of impact these alliances pose to the region's security, especially when the alliances are seeking to expand and upgrade. Asia-Pacific countries need to take the situation seriously and respond accordingly.

Based on China's overall assessment of the global situation, peace and development are the major trends of the times. But as war erupted and rages in Europe, regional countries should uphold the values of peace and development more than ever. The Asia-Pacific should show the world it can achieve sustainable development while maintaining peace. It is the biggest challenge for the region.

In order to secure sustainable development and become more resilient in maintaining peace, the region needs to avoid the difficulties Latin American countries suffered since they achieved economic take-off in the 1950s and 1960s (mainly a widening wealth gap, political instability and social disorder). In the past decades, the Asia-Pacific region's economic growth was driven by the rise of mega-economies such as China and India. But in the next stage, it is important to support small and medium economies to achieve industrialisation and modernisation, so the whole region can reach high-level balanced development, which will serve as major support for the region's long-term peace and prosperity.

The ongoing military conflict between



Royal Australian Navy submarine HMAS Rankin is seen during AUSINDEX 21, a biennial maritime exercise between the Royal Australian Navy and the Indian Navy, Darwin, Australia, September 5, 2021

Russia and Ukraine does have a complicated spillover effect in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the realm of security, and it looks set to intensify regional arms races and provide perverse incentives for nuclear proliferation, as well as cause the proliferation of medium-range ballistic missiles and anti-air missile systems. On one hand, it shows that after decades of globalisation, the world is closely connected and it is hard for the Asia-Pacific region to isolate itself from issues in other parts of the world and maintain its own economic momentum. On the other, it clarifies that Asia-Pacific countries must learn from these lessons and try their best to control and minimise any spillover effect from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Regarding security issues, regional countries must think carefully about introducing external powers within the region. They should strive to establish a balanced, effective and sustainable security mechanism based on the region's particular conditions, exploring a path for the long-term security and stability of the region.

The West has required China to choose between following the international community led by the West and supporting Russia. By doing this, they expect to exert the pressure of both morality and interests on China, so it would have to face the choice between right and wrong, as well as possibly huge losses if it supports Russia.

From the perspective of morality, the US and other Western countries appear to adopt a dichotomous thinking with a strong tendency for self-fulfilling prophecies, while ignoring the complexity of the issues and the

reality that the world is now multi-polar. China does not see the necessity to prove its righteousness by standing on the side of the West. China's priority is on the conditions and the prospects of bringing the conflict to an end pragmatically. For China, the top consideration for its diplomatic policies is how to end conflicts, rather than making empty declarations based on morality. If the entire world adopts dichotomous thinking and divides everything and everyone into either black or white, friends and enemies, the world will be driven to a Cold-War style confrontation.

From the perspective of realpolitik, China's refusal to join the West's sanctions against Russia will make it harder for the US to achieve its policy goals. But China's decision could benefit both the global economy and economic development in the Asia-Pacific region. By the same token, China's refusal to explicitly condemn Russia's actions is against the interests of the US-led "anti-Russia" camp, but can provide space for international mediation and diplomatic solutions. The reason China has not provided military support to Russia, as many in Washington were concerned about, is not because of US pressure, but lies in China's own goal to bring the conflict to an end.

China's stance on this issue is in line with most countries in the world and reflects its own assessment of the current status of its bilateral relationship with the US. Bearing in mind its international responsibilities, China has not chosen to address its disputes with the US following the conventional approach based on sphere of influence. From this perspective, China's current policy stance is already the best possible outcome the US could hope for. Not only has China not created "new troubles" that many in the US are concerned over, it also provides space for future diplomatic maneuvers to de-escalate the situation. ★

The author is a senior research fellow and director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies



HIRE HOPES

More people are turning to the gig economy as traditional jobs dry up, while fresh graduates are reluctant to settle for vocational careers

A woman looks at a poster at a job fair for graduates at Jilin University, Changchun, Jilin Province, March 31, 2021



Employment

A job fair at Hainan Normal University attracted a large number of 2022 graduates, October 31, 2021

PHOTO BY IC

WORK IN PROGRESS

Compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and global uncertainties, the number of China's college graduates has reached a record high, posing severe challenges to an already strained job market

By Chen Weishan

University student Wang Meng is interning at a startup in Beijing. As graduation approaches, she is struggling to find a job because of the pandemic. She expects to land a permanent position at her company, where for the past few months she has made 100 yuan (US\$15) a day. Her options are limited: China's ongoing zero-Covid policy restrictions prevent her from interviewing face to face with companies elsewhere.

The effects have been mirrored nationwide. During a teleconference with provincial leaders in early May, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang cautioned of a "grim" outlook for China's job market and encouraged local authorities to focus on job stability.

Around 16 million new workers are entering the job market this year, official data says. Among them, 10.76 million are college graduates, an increase of 1.67 million year-on-year. In 1999, the first year China's universities expanded enrollment, there were around 1 million college students.

In late April, recruitment platform Zhaopin released a report that said

more than 3 percent of new college graduates are either working as freelancers or delaying their job hunt. New hires are down by 16 percent compared to last year, while salaries fell around 12 percent.

During a symposium on employment in China on April 7, Chinese Vice Premier Hu Chunhua said the pandemic had severely affected employment, along with other factors. He highlighted the country would prioritise employment stability aiming for an urban unemployment rate below 5.5 percent in 2022.

Harsh Reality

Feng Lijuan, a human resources expert at recruitment platform 51 job, was once optimistic about this year's job market. "In fact, from the number of positions available last autumn, demand at some companies even doubled the previous year," Feng said, adding that demand for graduate students in the semiconductor and integrated circuit fields was very high.

"There is a sizeable gap for professionals in the Chinese mainland

semiconductor industry. Software engineers are particularly in high demand compared with hardware engineers,” a head of a chip design company in Shanghai told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity. However, a survey conducted by 51job.com among 187 semiconductor companies showed over half hit 60 percent of their recruitment quotas last autumn. “We’d usually see a surge of graduates looking for jobs in the spring,” Feng said. “However, the pandemic and the subsequent prevention and control measures have significantly affected the ongoing spring recruitment, and the whole rhythm has been disrupted.”

This is especially true in Shanghai. “Now everyone is locked down at home, and so far, there is no clue when the annual job fair originally scheduled for March by the municipal government will go ahead,” said an HR representative at a Shanghai-based enterprise. The company launched its own online recruitment campaign, but is not optimistic given the ongoing pandemic controls. “The situation is grim,” Feng said. “Even if enterprises have recruitment demands, it’s difficult for graduates to interview and intern offline due to pandemic prevention and control measures.”

Neither is Beijing’s job market faring well. Around 27 universities in the capital moved classes online for the spring semester. “Some universities can’t teach offline, and science students may not graduate because they cannot conduct experiments. Even though some universities allowed students to return to campus, the tightened controls might highly affect their internships. Even if the universities help students seek internships off-campus, many employers are cautious and unwilling to offer them,” Liu Lin, rector of Beijing City University, told *ChinaReport*.

The proportion of college grads who remain unemployed after commencement has increased since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. “The ongoing pandemic, interwoven with the macro-economic downturn, has had a tremendous impact on the employment of college graduates,” said Zeng Xiangquan, director of the Employment Research Institute at the Renmin University of China in Beijing.

Zeng pointed out that recruitment is affected as soon as there is an outbreak. Earlier this year, cities in economically developed regions such as the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta enacted strict pandemic controls. Industries including tourism and dining have not recovered, leaving many job-seeking graduates in limbo.

“This year may be the most difficult for college graduates to find jobs,” Liu Lin said.

Enrollment vs Options

“In China’s past development stages of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, the focus for employment was on attracting migrant workers from rural areas,” Zeng said. “But as urbanisation improved, college graduates have become the focus of employment for China.”

“Expanding enrollment in higher education... has become a ‘reservoir’ to help ease employment pressure,” Qu Yue, director at the Institute of Population and Labour Economics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. “But this is more like taking painkillers, which doesn’t cure the disease,” Qu said.

As the number of college grads grows, employment demand in traditional industries has decreased. Real estate, education and internet-based sectors were hit first. According to the 2022 Autumn Recruitment Market released by 51job.com, real estate and education fell from the top 10 sectors, with demand only 57 percent and 61 percent of what it was in 2020. Liu Lin said that education alone employed up to one million college grads in 2020, but this year demand is virtually non-existent.

“Over the past two years, the internet, education and healthcare were the primary employers of fresh graduates... but this year it’s clear that recruitment in these industries has become more sporadic,” Liu Lin said.

In the internet sector, the situation is much more complex. “Internet giants are recruiting new graduates while laying off experienced employees to cut costs,” an industry insider told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity.

Many internet companies promised huge hiring stints for 2022. Tencent said it would offer over 7,000 jobs to new graduates in 2022, an annual increase of over 40 percent. Baidu claims it is to launch its largest-ever campus recruitment with 8,000 offers. Wang Qiang, a mid-level manager at a smaller internet company, told *ChinaReport* that simultaneous mass hirings and layoffs are normal for the industry, while the final headcount definitely drops.

In the financial sector, strengthened regulation has been the dominant factor since 2017. Along with deleveraging and risk prevention, development slowed, and jobs decreased overall. According to Zhaopin, the financial sector saw a 39.7 percent drop in new job positions, the highest among all industries in Q1 2019.

Private enterprises are major job creators. But due to the pandemic and other factors, private sector demand, especially from micro, small- and medium-sized enterprises, has decreased significantly.

Fit for the Job

As employment preferences among young people change, more will choose to be unemployed as they pass on less-preferred jobs, which stay unfilled, said Jia Nan, former deputy director of the National Bureau of Statistics.

This trend is most prominent in manufacturing. According to data from the Information Centre of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security in Q3 2021, manufacturing had the largest demand for professionals (38.7 percent), followed by wholesale and retail (9.7 percent). But college graduates’ job preferences do not match demand. According to the 2021 College Student Employment Research Report by Zhaopin, more than a quarter of all graduates wanted to work in IT, communications, electronics and internet-based industries, followed by real estate, construction, culture, media, entertainment, sports and finance sectors.

“The employment difficulties graduates have are more of a structural problem where the human resources do not match the needs of job market development,” Qu Yue told *ChinaReport*. For example, the manufacturing industry needs more skilled workers, but the skills grad-



PHOTO BY CNS

An online interview session for spring 2022 college graduates was held at Fuzhou City Professionals Reserve Centre in China's southern coastal Fujian Province, February 10

uates learn at universities do not meet demand, so they still need to start from the bottom if they enter the manufacturing industry.

“College graduates expect to start with office work. They aren't qualified for engineering positions immediately after graduation. They often need to work production lines for three to five years, but new graduates tend to lack the patience and are unwilling to do factory work after getting a college degree,” said Ma Jiehong, director of the training department at IMS Gear, a multinational gear and transmission manufacturer.

“Employment demand from enterprises is very high, but it's not always easy to recruit enough graduates from our vocational school,” said Wang Xuexi, director at Suzhou-based Chien-shiung Institute of Technology. “Every year, there are 12 jobs to every student. Sometimes the ratio is as high as 20 to 1. Even though recruitment demand shrank this year, there are still plenty of positions available for our graduates.”

“Now more and more graduates from our vocational school hope to continue their education and get bachelor's degrees to become white-collar workers or civil servants,” Wang said, adding that up to 80 percent in recent years want to pursue this option.

Zeng believes the reasons are obvious. “Considering the hours and intensity of factory work, coupled with poor conditions such as no air conditioning or even electric fans during summer, how can young people endure it?” Zeng said.

Needed Reforms

In March, the Ministry of Education launched a nationwide campaign that called on college and university presidents to visit enterprises and work on creating more job options for graduates. The campaign aims to help schools better prepare students to meet the needs of enterprises.

“We have implemented a system in which the course design for each major adjusts regularly according to the changes in market demand,” Liu Lin said. The short-term challenge, Liu said, is easing employment pressure for college graduates. For schools, that includes expanding graduate school enrollment. “This is not to postpone employment,

but a measure to reserve professionals for the development of high-end manufacturing and new service industries,” Liu said, who suggested expanding enrollment up to 100,000 slots for graduate students.

Liu said the increase in this year's advanced degree holders mainly stems from the enrolment expansion of high-level vocational schools. Therefore, local governments should create jobs and provide unemployment insurance compensation or employment subsidies.

Qu Yue highlighted the creation of temporary jobs, such as the high demand for pandemic control workers. For example, Tianjin announced on April 8 it would recruit 1,916 college graduates to conduct pandemic controls in communities across the city.

In March, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and 10 other government departments announced a campaign to create no less than 1 million internships for college graduates in 2022. Companies that take part in the programme provide interns with basic living expenses and insurance for government subsidies.

Some provinces have taken advantage of the programme. Guizhou Province proposed a target of no less than 15,000 internship positions, while Gansu Province plans to offer over 10,000. Zeng said the 1 million-internship target would burden local government revenues.

“There are few policy tools available in the short term. On the one hand, we can expand the scale of internship programmes temporarily to delay graduates from entering the job market, while on the other, we should tolerate a temporary increase in unemployment. We can expect that as pandemic controls improve, the economy will revive and the situation will improve,” Zeng said, adding that more long-term reforms and strategies are needed.

“To solve the employment issues of college graduates in the long run, we need to build a lifelong human resources cultivation system from a top-level perspective. That is to say, more people can have opportunities to update their skill sets to adapt to changing needs,” Qu said.

“Colleges and universities should closely correlate their programmes to emerging industry development trends and set up information management systems to provide students with stratified, precise and personalised guidance to help them evaluate job options, benefits and risks,” Zeng said. “The government should improve its flexible employment guarantee mechanism for college students, provide social security subsidies, pensions and medical insurance for those who work in the platform economy, and provide policy consultation, financing, physical space and tax reductions to students seeking to set up startups.”

Zeng said in some aspects, concerning the development of higher education in China, many maintain a planned economy mentality, and the country should shift focus to cultivating professionals who meet job market demands through reform.

“In general, stable employment for college graduates requires in-depth and systematic thinking about professional cultivation reforms. At the same time, individuals, schools and society need to change their ideas about employment. In the current climate, the time of landing a good job entirely based on an advanced degree is over,” Zeng said. ★



Employment

PHOTO BY IC



PHOTO BY YCG

TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Left: A professional housekeeper organises shoes in a client's home, Wuhan, Hubei Province, January 13
Right: A food delivery rider en route, Quanzhou, Fujian Province, March 18

With the gig economy boom reflecting shifts in China's economy, *ChinaReport* investigates the growing power that platforms wield over workers, reforms underway and the market forces at play

By Jiang Zhiyu

“I'd rather deliver takeout than work in a factory,” Zhang Linzhou said. After earning a degree in civil engineering, the 20-something worked different jobs for two years before hopping onto a delivery platform.

Though the hours are long and hard, Zhang said a friend, who works in a factory, reminds him it could be worse with stories of his experience. “There's no time to rest, no dignity,” Zhang said. “Factory workers have to ask permission to go to the bathroom, and they are only allowed two bathroom breaks a day.”

“Working at a factory is like a prison sentence, so I wouldn't even consider it if I was desperate,” Zhang said.

The platform economy is attracting more of China's workforce than ever. Wen Xiaoyi, director of Department of Labour Relations at the China University of Labour Relations in Beijing, told *ChinaReport*

that behind the trend is a shift in labour resources from traditional manufacturing to service industries, especially in the platform industry. “The gig economy used to be a marginal secondary labour market. Now it's part of the primary labour market, even becoming a major channel for employment.”

There are about 200 million gig workers in China, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Gig work covers traditional industries like housekeeping and newer app-based services such as takeout delivery, ride hailing, livestreaming and “game boosting” – when a highly skilled gamer logs into another player's account to boost their ranking in a particular game for a fee.

The rise of the gig economy not only reflects changes in China's economic and job landscape, but also corporate cutbacks and a greater desire for flexible hours among younger workers.



A designated driver (left) and his son (right) finish work late night in Chongqing, June 13, 2020. These drivers help people drive their vehicles home if they exceed the limit for drunk driving



A vendor sells clothes on a livestreaming platform, Binzhou, Shandong Province, June 28, 2020

Aiming to promote “flexible employment” and part-time work, the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the Digital Economy issued in January by the State Council, China’s cabinet, encourages people to find work and start businesses through social media, knowledge sharing and other online platforms. Some experts laud the platform economy as a solution to job creation for lower-income people that also reduces costs and increases efficiency for businesses.

However, the flex most gigs promise is usually less than advertised, as algorithm-based platforms can exert even more control over workers’ time than traditional employment. Also, gig workers lack insurance, face increased job instability and are more exposed to economic risks. In July 2021, a ministerial-level document was released to strengthen the rights and interests of gig workers, such as requiring platforms to purchase workers’ compensation and insurance plans.

Emerging Market

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of migrant workers in the secondary industry, mainly manufacturing and construction, decreased from 56.8 percent in 2013 to 48.1 percent in 2020, while the proportion in the tertiary industry, which includes services both online and offline, and real estate sectors, increased from 42.6 percent in 2013 to 51.5 percent in 2020.

“The rise of flexible employment has a lot to do with the transformation of China’s labour-industrial structure,” Sun Ping, an assistant researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Institute of Journalism and Communication, told *ChinaReport*. As factories and labour-intensive industries relocate to Southeast Asia, India and Africa, China’s workers are moving to other industries, Sun said.

According to Zeng Xiangquan, director of the Employment Research Institute at the Renmin University of China in Beijing, using the term “flexible employment” to describe the gig economy is misleading. “Flexibility can refer to either time or place, such as working remotely. But now the media, as well as some government documents, use the term flexible employment to describe informal

employment or what the International Labour Organisation refers to as non-standard employment,” Zeng told *ChinaReport*. “If we use these latter definitions, the number of gig workers in China is significantly more than 200 million.”

Wen Xiaoyi believes that transitional stages of labour-industrial reform inevitably affect traditional employment. “The gig economy acts like an ‘employment reservoir,’ a supplement to formal employment that can support the job market when employment in the real economy is not optimistic,” Wen said. “From this perspective, national policies should support the development of flexible employment.”

Another factor driving China’s gig economy is businesses cutting labour costs to maximise profits, Wen said. After the 2008 financial crisis, quantitative easing led to inflation, which attracted large amounts of hot money to internet-based industries. This meant investment from international financial capital motivated businesses to adopt asset-light approaches, which involved outsourcing workers through subcontractors and cooperating with platforms, Sun Ping said.

Platforms also make getting part-time work easier. According to data released by delivery app Meituan, the number of riders on its platform increased from 2.2 million in 2017 to 5.27 million in 2021.

The trend goes beyond food delivery and ride hailing. Liu Fen, in her 40s, has worked with a housekeeping app for four years. She works 10 hours a day, five days a week for 43 yuan (US\$4.4) an hour. According to an industry survey by Liang Meng, an associate professor at the School of Humanities and Development at China Agricultural University in Beijing, internet platforms improve professionalism and specialisation in their trades. “Platform training and management can help to improve workers’ expertise in housekeeping. As a result, it improves the public image of housekeepers, while increasing awareness of the social value of housekeeping professionals and overall respect for domestic work,” Liang said.

Housekeeping apps have clear advantages over traditional housekeeping firms in terms of volume, which makes recruitment easier. Liang said that internet-based housekeeping services allow the labour

market to benefit from capital investments directly.

Zeng acknowledged the issues that come along with China's high proportion of flexible employment. Many join the gig economy reluctantly as formal employment becomes increasingly scarce. "In the long term, all kinds of 'flexible employment' including the platform economy may face issues of stability, sustainability, career development and social security, which requires more in-depth research to find solutions," Zeng said.

Like many others, Zhang Linzhou chose delivery because of the flexibility and freedom of the job. Although platform management is very strict and the algorithm constantly pushes riders to be faster, Zhang said he can handle the challenges. However, he only takes two days off a month and cannot take breaks while on the job, because he must compete with other riders for orders.

Legal Obstacles

In his research, Sun Ping found that platforms have ways to keep riders from leaving. Since platforms always need riders, they reward those who commit to fixed hours, which further reduces the job's promised flexibility. The algorithm encourages riders to compete – the more orders a rider completes, the higher the guaranteed fee per order. "The platform gamifies their incentives," Sun said. "From 2018 to 2021, the total work hours per delivery rider on the platform grew longer and longer."

Housekeeping platforms have similarly rigged their systems. Liu Fen said during the Chinese New Year holiday when she would get four orders a day, the platform only gave her 30 minutes to reach the address. Liu told the reporter that she had to skip lunches. The app tracks her through her phone, and automatically fines her 10 yuan (US\$1.5) for arriving late to appointments and up to 50 yuan (US\$7.6) for cancelling.

Wen said the flexibility gigs offer can be a poor trade-off. "People with high-tech skills can earn enough money for a year by freelancing for two or three months," Wen said. "But lower-skilled workers such as delivery riders and housekeepers have to work at least six days a week to guarantee their income."

Legal issues are another problem. "The platform gig economy is a new and complex form of employment with relatively little regulation," Yao Yanjiao, a lawyer with the Beijing Zhicheng Legal Aid and Research Centre for Migrant Workers, told *ChinaReport*. "This has led to unclear standards for identifying labour relations and the rights and responsibilities of platforms," Yao said, referring to how platforms do not sign contracts with riders directly but through an intermediary or a third-party agency.

Yao said third-party contractors act as a buffer between riders and platforms, which makes it nearly impossible for them to voice their woes with platforms directly.

But changes are happening. In July 2021, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and eight other departments issued new guidelines that made local governments responsible for encouraging platform enterprises to sign written agreements with workers and establish rights and obligations for enterprises and workers.

The guidelines also call to strengthen workers' compensation and organise pilot programmes for gig workers in transport, food delivery, courier and city freight services. The guideline encourages platform enterprises to purchase personal accident insurance and employer liability insurance, which insiders said many platforms are now doing. Yao Yanjiao suggested platforms should make their algorithm-based systems worker friendly.

Internet and market authorities issued regulations in effect since March 1 that state: "If algorithm recommendation service providers provide work dispatch services to workers, they shall protect the legitimate rights and interests of workers such as labour remuneration, rest and holiday, and establish and improve relevant algorithms such as order distribution, remuneration composition and payment, work hours, rewards and fines." Wen suggested that gig workers should also be represented in China's trade union system so they can negotiate with platforms directly.

But experts said sectors such as housekeeping need more government support, especially as China relaxes its restrictions on childbirth and faces an ageing population. "The challenges generated by gig economy including housekeepers is a global issue," Liang said.

Many countries such as Germany, Liang said, have integrated these trades into its government employment system, which helps standardise the industry and raises the social status of working in domestic services.

"Either we need to set up legislation to clarify labour relations or [the government] should provide support for these occupations," Liang said. ★

Zhang Linzhou and Liu Fen are pseudonyms



A window cleaner works in a community, Jinan, East China's Shandong Province, September 2, 2021

Photo by VCG

Wetland Conservation

Keeping Wet and Wild

As China passes a new law to protect wetlands ahead of a multinational conference in Wuhan, experts are still concerned that development trumps conservation

By Zhang Xinyu and Wang Yan

The East Asia-Australasian Flyway is one of nine global migratory bird routes, covering 22 countries and regions. About five million waterbirds use the flyway to travel from southern Australia to northern Siberia, passing through the Chinese mainland and its coastal areas each year. The coastal wetland in Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province is its midpoint.

“Lianyungang coastal wetland is a very important stopover for migratory birds to refuel,” said Cai Zhiyang, an assistant research professor at the School of Environmental Science and Engineering of Southern University of Science and Technology who has visited Lianyungang wetlands many times. “Most of these migratory birds spend the winter in Southeast Asia or Australia, and they stay in Lianyungang for one to two months before continuing their northward migration. The route is reversed when they migrate south in the autumn,” he told *ChinaReport*.

An article published by *Avian Research* in 2021 looked into the importance of the wetlands, particularly for threatened bird species. “The coastal wetlands of Lianyungang are the most important stopover site for Asian Dowitchers during both northward and southward migrations; they supported over 90 percent of the estimated global population during northward migration in two consecutive years (May 2019 and 2020),” the article read.

The Asian Dowitcher is already classified as Near Threatened by the IUCN. A large wader, the shorebird lives on coasts and tidal mudflats during migration and wintering, where it uses its long bill to find mollusks, crustaceans and other food in the shallow waters. While their range is relatively large in southern and eastern Asia, their numbers are small, so the stopover in Lianyungang is crucial to ensure a healthy breeding population as they move to northeast China or

Siberia, and then for the return journey to southeast Asia or even as far as northern Australia.

“So far, there is no clear scientific explanation for this rare phenomenon,” Cai said. “For the Asian Dowitcher, the coastal wetlands in Lianyungang are an irreplaceable habitat, and if they are lost, it may cause the bird’s extinction.”

Environmentalists have raised concern over a Lianyungang development project called Blue Bay, which was approved as a coastal ecological protection and restoration project. Chinese environmental NGO Friends of Nature alleged that the so-called environmental scheme is nothing more than a construction project that will wreak destruction on the natural shoreline and coastal wetlands. In May 2021, Friends of Nature filed a public interest litigation at Nanjing Intermediate Court in Jiangsu Province. Although the court accepted the filing,



PHOTO BY CNS

Swans glide along the water in Beidagang Wetland, Tianjin, November 23, 2021. As part of one of the eight most important global bird migration routes, Tianjin sees large numbers of migratory birds in winter

construction on Blue Bay did not stop. On January 6, Friends of Nature applied for an injunction to halt all activities, but the court has yet to rule.

Swapping Mud for Sand

The Blue Bay project is located in the coastal wetland of the Linhong estuary in Lianyungang. In the Overall Plan of Lianyungang City (2008-2030), the city government proposed “developing eastward and embracing the sea” as part of its Lianyungang New City strategy. According to the environmental impact assessment (EIA) for Blue Bay, the mud flats would affect the image of the new city, while Blue Bay would give the new urban development an ideal coastal view, clear water and white sands.

A wetland is defined as an ecosystem that is permanently or seasonally flooded, and includes coastal and riverine ecosystems, lakes, marshes, peatlands and bogs, and can be salt or freshwater. They support biodi-

versity and perform vital ecosystem services, such as flood prevention by acting like a sponge as well as carbon capture.

Blue Bay has three parts: infrastructure, shoreline restoration and wetland restoration. This includes building a large semicircular beach dike to block sediment and create a new lagoon cut off from the sea, up to a depth of four metres. The mud flats are to be transformed into a sandy beach through dredging and adding sand, causing the loss of part of the shorebirds’ foraging ground.

Princeton University researcher Dr. Mu Tong from the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology has twice visited the Blue Bay area. Mu told *ChinaReport* the dike will halt natural tidal flows. Areas that were covered and uncovered every day by the tides will be flooded, meaning the organisms the birds eat – mostly bottom feeders on the sea floor known as the benthic zone – will die due to lack of oxygen.

The wetland restoration of the Blue Bay

project, according to Cai, involves building a lake, planting trees and constructing footpaths. “This project is not conducted from an ecological perspective but for the sake of people to enjoy comfort,” Cai said.

After environmental experts pointed out the likely damage, Blue Bay’s developers changed course. *ChinaReport* learned that the planned rubber dam in the dike has been changed to a water gate. From June to August, the water level would be kept at about four metres, and the water gate will be lifted at other times of the year, allowing normal ebbs and flows.

However, Mu Tong said the new design ignores that migratory birds need more than an area of mud flats.

“They need the food in that mud flat area. High summer water levels prohibit the growth of organisms in the benthic zone, and even when the mud flats are exposed again in autumn, there won’t be enough food,” Mu said.

Controversial EIA

Zhang Mingxiang, vice dean of the School of Ecology and Nature Conservation at Beijing Forestry University, helped draft China's first Wetland Protection Law, which takes effect on June 1. Zhang said both protection and utilisation of wetlands are important. "The purpose of protection is to ensure better utilisation. Reasonable and orderly utilisation, such as the construction of necessary tourist facilities and roads should be allowed if they are not excessive," he said.

Yet the controversies over Blue Bay focus on the lack of and false investigation of birds in the EIA report. According to court documents Friends of Nature submitted, the bird survey in the EIA report contradicts reality and there are "data errors." "We believe that the so-called restoration by the Blue Bay project is unscientific and inconsistent with the law of ecological restoration," said Ma Rongzhen, a pro bono lawyer working with Friends of Nature. The project is no more than a new development, not an ecological restoration, Ma said.

At the end of 2019, Blue Bay's developer, Golden Coast Company, commissioned Nanjing Normal University to compile a report titled "Impact Analysis of Lianyung New City and Lihong Estuary Coastal Wetland Ecological Restoration Project on Bird Activities." It found 92 species of birds in Lihong Estuary Coastal Wetland in Lianyungang, three national first-level protected bird species and 11 national second-level protected bird species. Three endangered bird species, two vulnerable bird species and nine Near Threatened species on the IUCN Red List were recorded. Wen Cheng, an expert on the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) told the reporter that according to the information made public, Blue Bay was extremely lax in its consideration of biodiversity protection during the project's feasibility study, planning, design and construction, and many aspects should be rectified.

Zhang Mingxiang, conservation ex-



An artificial beach near the coastal wetlands in Lianyungang has buried a natural tidal flat, December 18, 2021. Conservationists warn that lack of food could cause the extinction of some wetlands and migratory species of birds

PHOTO COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF NATURE

pert and deputy dean of the School of Ecology and Nature Conservation at Beijing Forestry University, told *ChinaReport* that a proper evaluation of birds and biodiversity for an environmental impact assessment depends on whether the team includes professionals with relevant expertise, since this is not mandatory.

Upgraded Conservation

The East Asia-Australasian Flyway passes through China's population-dense and economically developed eastern coast. As urban areas expanded, there was constant reclamation and occupation of wetlands, Zhang said. According to a journal paper titled "Lessons from Development of the US West to China's 'Go-West' Campaign" published for *Resources Science* in November 2015, similar to the situation in the US in the 19th century when wetland reclamation, cultivation and crop planting were encouraged, 90 percent of the wetlands (up to tens of millions of hectares) in the western US were converted into farmland and residential land, which resulted in severe biodiversity damage.

In 1992, China joined the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention), which was regarded as a turning point for wetland protection in China. Before that, there was no concept of wetlands in Chinese research communities. Zhang

said the Ramsar Convention requires states to identify their wetland resources, so the State Forestry Administration organised a national wetland resources survey from 1995 to 2003 and a second one from 2009 to 2013. According to Zhang, who took part in both, the surveys showed China's wetlands were increasingly under threat. Statistics showed their total area decreased by 8.82 percent between the first and second survey, and coastal wetlands in 11 provinces decreased by 21.91 percent.

In December 2016, the State Council issued the Plan for Wetland Protection and Restoration System, which proposed a red line area for inland and coastal wetlands of a minimum 800 million *mu* (53.3m hectares) by 2020, based on the second wetland survey results. According to statistics released in August 2021, China's total wetland area remains over 800 million *mu* (53.3m hectares). Sixty-four wetlands in China are listed as Wetlands of International Importance. In addition, China has set up 602 wetland nature reserves and over 1,600 wetland parks. In 2003, the State Council issued the National Wetland Protection Project Plan (2002-2030), which includes three five-year implementation plans. The central government invested 19.8 billion yuan (US\$3.13b) in over 4,100 projects to encourage local governments to carry out wetland ecological protection and restoration. In 2021, China introduced its first-ever Wetland Protection

Law, and all provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities issued wetland protection regulations. The law takes effect on June 1, 2022.

From November 21 to 29, China will host the 14th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (COP14) in Wuhan, capital of Central China's Hubei Province. Zhang Mingxiang said that 2021 marks the 50th anniversary of China's signing of the Ramsar Convention, but speeding up wetland protection legislation is needed to implement the convention.

Zhang added that when drafting the Wetland Protection Law, lawmakers took into consideration how effective restoration projects will be. "Sometimes good intentions do not mean making things good, not to mention when people do things just in the name of good intentions," Zhang said. Part of the law is designed specifically for wetland restoration, stating that important projects will be submitted to provincial forestry and grassland departments, which will consider the opinions of other departments, including water resources, environment, agriculture and housing. Failing to abide by the law will incur fines from 100,000 yuan (US\$15,720) up to 1 million yuan (US\$157,200).

In Zhang Mingxiang's opinion, a good wetland restoration project should identify existing ecological problems and determine their causes, such as water shortages, pollution or alien species invasion, before conducting restoration activities.

Wen Cheng believes biodiversity should be an important indicator of restoration. "In the planning and design stage, biodiversity conservation should be the goal. The designer and contractor should clearly understand which common species and which rare and endangered species live or once lived in the project's location. In the planning and design process, there should be specific and measurable indicators of biodiversity restoration after the project. To be more specific, we need

to know which species we should engineer restoration solutions for to ensure their numbers don't fall further, and what solutions we should engineer to allow reintroduction and preservation of species when the project is done. We can then use these indicators to test whether the project is successful," Wen said.

Ensuring the proper use of funds earmarked for ecological restoration takes strict referral to scientific information, establishing standardised technical specifications, and tracking and evaluating biodiversity results, Wen added.

Bird's Eye Scrutiny

Despite increased attention, threats remain to wetland areas, including Chifeng Port Wetland project in Nanhui Dongtan Wetland area in Shanghai, and the Shahe Wetland Park which is already under construction at Shahe Reservoir in Beijing, although they do not include commercial developments. These projects are under scrutiny because of ongoing ecological restoration activities which may destroy the wetlands and result in further loss of habitat for migratory birds.

BirdLife International, a global partnership of NGOs that focuses on conservation, recognised Nanhui Dongtan Wetland as an internationally important bird habitat in 2008. Zhang Dongsheng, an associate professor at Shanghai Ocean University, conducted a bird diversity survey from September 2020 to August 2021 which recorded 237 species of wild birds. But Nanhui Dongtan Wetland is still not included in the list of important wetlands in Shanghai. Since 2017, extensive areas of reed beds have been replaced with 233 hectares of Chinese fir trees. The National Forestry and Grassland Administration (NFGA) ordered Nanhui Dongtan to make up for the destruction by creating the 1.7-square-kilometre Chifeng Port Wetland. But in February 2022, bird watchers in Shanghai found sizeable areas of reeds were flattened during the restoration process,

posing potential threats to the reed parrotbill, whose habitat is already squeezed. Zhang Dongsheng told *ChinaReport* that he had already advised the project leaders to keep the reed beds, and they seemed receptive.

The situation of the Shahe Wetland in the rural north of Beijing is similar. According to statistics from birdreport.cn, 294 bird species, including first- and second-class national protected animal species such as the relict gull, great bustard, tundra swan and reed parrotbill have been recorded. Still, Shahe is not listed as one of the capital's important wetlands. The Shahe Wetland Park project has been going on for years, and has already come under scrutiny. The EIA report was approved in September 2017, but some issues, including fountains for a "water dance show" and several boat docks, posed dangers to birdlife. A revised proposal and feasibility study in 2020 removed the initial construction plans.

Since April 2021, Let Birds Fly, a Chinese non-profit foundation, filed several public interest lawsuits in Beijing's Changping District, which alleges that Shahe Wetland Park emphasised landscaping and ignored wetland protection. On February 24 this year, the district held a hearing to address the issues.

Since July 2021, Friends of Nature has been requesting Changping District Landscaping Bureau, which oversees Shahe Wetland Park, to make the final plans available for public review, to no avail. According to Friends of Nature, this reflects the lack of government openness in wetland conservation.

Despite questions and challenges from environmental NGOs and ecological experts, the construction in Shahe Wetland Park, like the Blue Bay project in Lianyungang, is ongoing. On March 24, a supervisor with Changping District Landscaping Bureau surnamed Zhao told *ChinaReport* that the construction of Shahe Wetland Park is "in good order." ★

Transport

BAD BRAKES

China's truckers are struggling to survive as the freight industry faces shrinking profits, exploitative algorithms and Covid restrictions

By Jiang Zhiyu and Chen Weishan

Meng Yong has been stuck in Shanghai since March 29. Driving the 450-kilometre route between Wenzhou in neighbouring Zhejiang Province and Shanghai for years, the 51-year-old trucker had the misfortune to arrive the day before the citywide lockdown.

Unable to leave, Meng slept in his lorry, living on instant noodles and occasional food deliveries from fellow truckers and friends. His dog, Hami, never would eat instant noodles. Now it does.

For truckers who managed to leave Shanghai before the lockdown, life is not any easier. Many cities closed their borders to people coming from Shanghai and other virus epicenters. Zhu Wenqiang counts himself lucky. After delivering fruit from Hunan Province, Zhu left just before lockdown measures kicked in. However, he faced another fiasco as all highway exits in neighbouring provinces were closed off. Zhu had to park his lorry at a service station along the highway in Suzhou, neighbouring Zhejiang Province and lived in his lorry there about 20 days before he could leave in late April.

Caught in Lockdown

Meng and Zhu are just two among the thousands of truckers caught in limbo amid Covid-19 restrictions, struggling to earn a living in an industry already facing tremendous challenges.

Trucking used to be an attractive career in China, promising high incomes and a life on the road. But those days are long gone. The rise of online platforms increased competition and cut salaries, while the pandemic further strains this vital industry to China's supply chain.

According to a survey of over 15,000 lorry drivers by sociologist Shen Yuan from Tsinghua University, about half had got stuck on the road at least once due to Covid restrictions in March, while 8 percent said 10 times and 9.4 percent said they were stuck for a full



Enforcement officers check the health status of truckers on a mobile health app at a checkpoint in a suburb of Tongling, Anhui Province, March 18



Zhang Li, a trucker who drove from Fujian Province in Southeast China, unloads her truck in Wuxi, East China's Jiangsu Province, early April

week. After the strictest measures were launched in April, those numbers are likely to be much worse.

For many of China's lorry drivers, the past two years have been difficult. Considered a high-risk occupation, truckers must test for Covid more frequently and face heavier restrictions.

A major challenge is different regional policies, as many local authorities do not accept Covid PCR test certificates or travel clearances issued elsewhere. Zhang Li, a trucker who drives between East China's Fujian and Jiangsu provinces said she was once tested five times in one day.

"Every time I got off the highway, I had to test regardless of my previous test results," Zhang said. "Every time, there'd be long lines to get on and off the highway, which is really time consuming."

Even when local authorities accept test certificates issued in another region, truckers have to keep their status current. Across China, PCR test results are only valid for 48 hours. "It often takes longer than 24 hours to get test results back, which means you only have a few hours before it expires," Zhang said she is forced to take tests daily.

Zhu Wenqiang said this year is the freight industry's worst since he became a trucker in 2014. "My income fell 20 percent compared to last year, and 40 percent from the year before," Zhu said, adding he has a mortgage and a son in middle school.

According to Shen's survey, 62 percent of self-employed truckers pay more than 6,000 yuan (US\$885) in monthly lorry payments, yet 35.7 percent of them earned less than half that in March.

Platform Squeeze

Even before the pandemic, life for China's lorry drivers was difficult. Wen Xiang, a sociologist at the Renmin University of China in Beijing, told *ChinaReport* that the rise of apps and e-commerce has reshaped the entire trucking industry.

While the adoption of big data, algorithms and cloud computing have greatly increased the industry's efficiency, it has hurt truckers, who are mostly individual contractors with no strong union support.

In 2018, two of China's most popular lorry services platforms, Yunmanman and Huochebang, merged to become the Full Truck Alliance, controlling 90 percent of China's market share. Truckers are left with minimal bargaining power, and have to compete for orders online.

Zhang Tao, a trucker from Wuhan, Hubei Province, told *ChinaReport* that freight transport prices have been steadily decreasing. "In the past, a haul between Wuhan and Yichang (320 kilometres) would pay 1,600 yuan (US\$236), but now, it only pays 800 to 900 yuan," Zhang Tao said, adding that drivers are left to shoulder rising fuel prices and highway tolls.

According to Shen, a common sentiment among lorry drivers is that the group has become increasingly marginalised both

economically and socially over the past two decades. In the 1990s when China first liberalised its economy, trucking was among the best-paid blue-collar jobs, with many earning more than 200,000 yuan (US\$29,500) a year, higher than many white-collar workers.

But after more than two decades, the income of most lorry drivers has not increased along with China's economic growth, sliding to less than 200,000 yuan. "We have a saying: 'In the past, one lorry could support the whole family, but now it requires a whole family to support a lorry,'" Zhang Tao said.

Drivers complain they are not as respected as other high-risk essential workers, such as medical professionals. "Because of the pandemic, there are now strong prejudices against us," Meng Yong told *ChinaReport*.

For many drivers, the pandemic was the last straw. According to a report on the employment and status of lorry drivers in 2021 conducted by the China Federation of Logistics and Purchasing (CFLP), the number of lorry drivers in China sharply dropped from around 30 million in 2018 to about 20 million in 2021. Fewer truckers means those still on the road must work longer hours to keep the industry's wheels turning.

Supply Chain Disruption

Road freight is essential to China's economy. According to China's Ministry of Transport and China State Railway Group, more cargo was shipped by road than ship and railway combined in Q1 2022.

Since the pandemic, many local governments have adopted very strict restrictions on cross-regional transport, with some resorting to shutting down highways that run through their jurisdictions.

Gao Peng, CEO of Suyuan Tianxia, a logistics company in Suzhou, told *ChinaReport* that under Shanghai's strict lockdown measures, local authorities only issue travel clearances for essential goods, including food and pandemic-related items. "No permits were issued for carrying industrial goods," Gao said. Many factories in the region, including Tesla and Volkswagen, were forced to shut down. According to a research article released by Song Zheng, an economist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Chen Qin, chief economist with industry consulting firm Shanghai Pulse Data Technology, spot truckload volume in Shanghai dropped by 85 percent in early April compared to March.

Data from the Ministry of Transport on April 10 showed that 678 highway toll stations and 364 service stations in 16 provinces and municipalities were shut. According to the China Federation of Logistics and Purchasing, the total volume of nationwide lorry transport dropped by 25 percent in the fourth week of March. In April, China's logistics performance index came in at 43.8 percent, down 4.9 percentage points from March, marking two consecutive months of contraction in the sector.



Meng Yong's dog, Hami, in their truck, Minhang, Shanghai, April 15

The strict control measures that grounded many truckers also has led to a sharp increase in transportation costs. "Previously, the cost of sending a truckload from Suzhou to Kunshan, Jiangsu (55 kilometres) was between 1,000 and 2,000 yuan (US\$147-\$295), but it now costs about 7,000 to 8,000 yuan (US\$1,032-\$1,180)," Gao said.

This increase eats away at the profit margins of many smaller manufacturers. About 30 percent of Gao's clients have stopped making deliveries, while the rest continue just to maintain relationships with their customers.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the Purchasing Manager Index (PMI) of China's manufacturing industry fell to 47.4 percent in April from 49.5 percent in March, data which indicates recession. The figures suggest the manufacturing sector recorded two months of contraction during the latest outbreaks.



Zhang Tao in his truck on his way from Wuhan to Shanghai, late March

Back to Normal?

On April 11, the Ministry of Transport called for local transport authorities to quickly rectify the closure of highway service areas and toll gates to ensure access to highways.

In a teleconference held on April 18, China's Vice-Premier Liu He stressed that nucleic acid tests with a sampling interval of over 48 hours should be recognised across the country, and that drivers should not be restricted while waiting for test results.

Since then, highways in most places have reopened. On May 11, Li Guoping, an official with the Ministry of Transport, said at a press conference in Beijing that all highways have reopened nationwide. By May 10, highway lorry traffic increased by 26 percent compared to the same time last month, Li said. He stressed that free nucleic acid tests and better catering services for lorry drivers should be offered around the country.

As Covid cases fell in Shanghai, the city's Vice Mayor Zong Ming said on May 16 that Shanghai will fully return to normal life and production by mid-June. Some of Shanghai's subway and bus lines also began reopening on May 22. Truckers hope that restrictions on the trucking industry will be next.

It will not be easy. By our press time, Meng Yong and his dog are still stuck in Shanghai. The only way for him to leave there now is to find a client who can apply for an official permit to go to a new destination. He can order food delivery now, but it also means higher living costs.

Zhu Wenqiang has been helping his parents with farming since he finally returned to his hometown, Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, on May 9. He does not think the traffic is smooth enough for him to resume his business. ★

ACADEMIC RACKET

China's largest academic database has come under antitrust scrutiny after enraging users for what they claim is an unfair and expensive user agreement that does not give contributing scholars their due

By Liu Lei and Li Quanyun

Amid accusations of overpricing and monopoly abuses, China's market regulators opened an antitrust investigation into the China National Knowledge Infrastructure database (CNKI), the country's biggest academic database and source of research data, which was set up by top Chinese university Tsinghua.

China's State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR) announced the probe into CNKI over suspected monopolistic practices on its website on May 13. It did not provide further details.

The probe comes after a slew of complaints from academic institutions and universities about the exorbitant cost of subscribing to China's leading academic database.

On April 8, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) announced it was going to stop subscribing to CNKI as it could no longer justify the annual subscription fees, which had soared to 10 million yuan (US\$1.6m).

In 2021, six universities and research institutes, including Peking University and Wuhan University of Technology, had already unsubscribed to CNKI because of the rising costs, although after student pressure they backtracked. CNKI made a vague response to the CAS announcement, saying it would continue to provide normal services to all institutes affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Sciences until the end of their 2022 subscription. It did not explain how the an-

nual fee had risen so high.

For years, academic circles have questioned whether CNKI is too commercial and if it was abusing its dominant market position.

Pay Per View

CNKI, also known as Zhiwang, was set up in 1999 as an academic service by Tsinghua University and its commercial arm Tsinghua Tongfang, a Shanghai listed company and State-owned enterprise (SOE). Tsinghua Holdings, a company fully owned by Tsinghua University, used to be the holding shareholder of Tsinghua Tongfang. At the end of 2019, Tsinghua Holdings sold its Tongfang stake to SOE China National Nuclear Corporation Capital Holdings. The majority of the stake was transferred in early 2020, making China Nuclear the controlling shareholder of Tsinghua Tongfang since then. And in December 2021, Tsinghua University agreed to transfer its Tsinghua Holdings stake to Sichuan Energy Investment, another SOE, meaning Tsinghua has completely divested all its stock in CNKI.

CNKI, building on its lead as China started its online era in the early 2000s, has become China's largest repository of academic electronic resources, including over 95 percent of published Chinese academic resources. According to CNKI, in early 2020 it had over 33,000 institutional users, and more than 20 million individual registered

users across 56 countries globally, with 16 million daily visits. There can be up to 23.3 billion full text downloads a year.

"I used CNKI to review published research related to my dissertation almost every day in the months I was writing my doctoral paper," Liu Tao, a PhD candidate in anthropology, told *ChinaReport*. "I rarely try other academic databases like Wanfang and Weipu, because they only host a fraction of published academic resources compared to CNKI."

CNKI hosts more than 95 percent of published Chinese academic resources and has signed exclusive contracts with over 1,690 journals. The two other databases used in China, Wanfang and Weipu, also known as VIP, have exclusive contracts with Chinese journals too, but these only number in the hundreds.

In 2020, CNKI posted revenue of 1.168 billion yuan (US\$172m), and the gross profit margin was 54 percent. In 2021, annual revenue increased to 1.289 billion yuan (US\$190m), and its profitability was 53 percent. Students pay an average of 15-25 yuan (US\$2-4) for each paper they download. CNKI charges different fees for universities and research institutions depending on their student numbers and size of funding.

But within its business model, CNKI's major client base is also the primary provider of its product.

"The information contributors to CNKI

are also the target audience for the information they provide,” Jia Kang, president of the China Academy of New Supply-side Economics told *ChinaReport* in April.

CNKI gets dissertations and theses from universities and academic journal content. Then it charges subscription fees from institutions and universities for using its databases and charges individual users with fees to download documents.

The fees charged to institutions rise annually. In 2016, Wuhan University of Technology issued a statement saying that from 2010 to 2016, the average annual increase of CNKI database prices was 18.98 percent. Yet CNKI pays a one-off flat fee to the copyright owners of journal articles and dissertations. These fees have not risen since 2016. The copyright owners of a doctoral thesis published after 2008 and selected by CNKI receive a 400 yuan (US\$59) CNKI database coupon and 100 yuan (US\$15) in cash, but the copyright owners of a doctoral dissertation published before 2008 get even less. The copyright owner, however, does not see any share of the revenue generated from downloads.

Suspected Monopoly

The focus of the public controversy is not on the fees, but rather the unreasonably high profits CNKI reaps. According to Feng Xiaoqing, director of the Centre for Institute for Intellectual Property Economics Studies at the China University of Political Science and Law, the core of the controversy is the unequal and opaque profit sharing between CNKI, academic journals or universities and copyright owners.

“CNKI should be aware that a lot of the public dissatisfaction is justified,” Jia Kang said.

Over the past decade, at least six universities said they had stopped subscribing to CNKI but reluctantly resumed cooperation.

CNKI’s integrated database has been promoting the digitalisation of academic resources and publishing resources since online research took hold in the late 1990s. The uniqueness of its content and the one-stop research function with resource integration have absolute market advantages. Scholars feel if their articles are included in CNKI, it is a reflection of their academic achievements and status.

Most users feel CNKI is an unaffordable but indispensable resource, a situation which gave CNKI the space to keep inflating its prices. Now, China’s market regulators may agree.

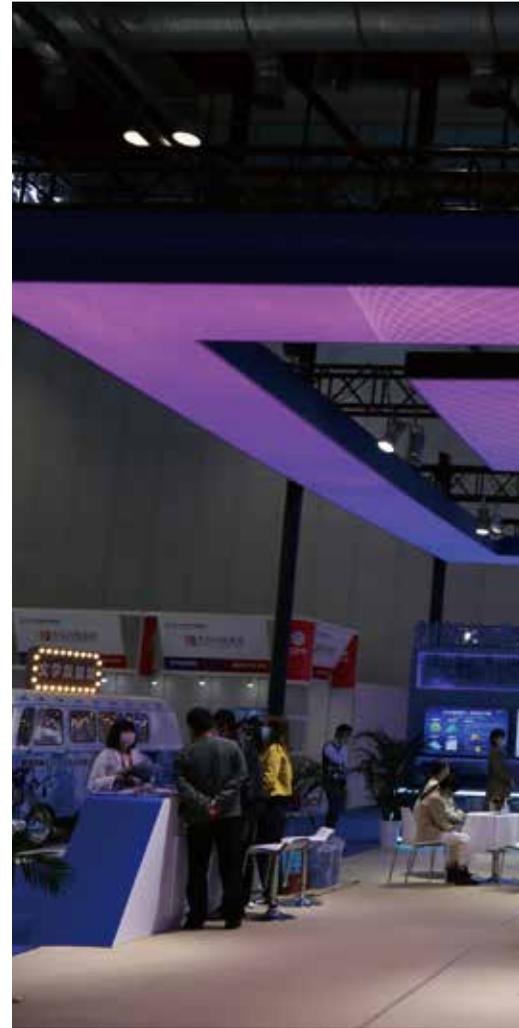
China’s Anti-monopoly Law which was revised in 2021 stipulates that operators with a dominant market position are prohibited from abusing it, including items such as “selling goods at unfairly high prices or buying goods at unfairly low prices.”

Feng Xiaoqing said that to determine whether CNKI holds a monopoly, the first thing to establish is whether CNKI has a dominant market position. Since that is not illegal, authorities must judge whether it abused this position.

“To some extent, considering CNKI can provide information services such as plagiarism checks, one-stop searches, digitalisation of academic resources and other services, it is understandable for it to charge fees for these services,” Jiang Zhipei, former vice president of the second Council of China Copyright Research Society told *Legal Weekly* in early May.

“The problem with CNKI is that most of the resources on its databases are not fully authorised by the author while it charges institutional subscribers high prices, so it has become excessively commercial,” Jiang said.

Once a paper has been uploaded, CNKI’s model means it is the only entity that profits from its downloads.



The 11th China Digital Publishing Expo opens at the China’s National Convention Centre in Beijing, October 27, 2021

“Basically, CNKI built a public knowledge database, but now its public interest attributes are weakened by its quest for profits. At present, the pricing mechanism of CNKI is not transparent, and its primary income still comes from copyright fees,” Cong Lixian, Dean of the School of Intellectual Property, East China University of Political Science and Law told *Legal Weekly* in early May.

Superficial Response

Under pressure from media, academics and the legal establishment, CNKI made some efforts. This included allowing free



PHOTO BY VCG

access to academic resources published prior to 2008, launching an authors' service platform, and lowering the download price for master's and doctoral dissertations. However, Jia said these measures were superficial and CNKI still needs to set up an effective incentive mechanism and find a balance between profits and fulfilling its public interest role.

"CNKI should not only play its role in connecting with the market but also acknowledge that its database is at a certain level a public good, or even come under the description of public interests under the concept of a public good," said Jia, adding that

it requires input from several stakeholders. "We should allow a certain level of market competition to use market power to address price inflation." But if this happens, Jia said, "Wouldn't it be possible to reach a balancing point to achieve zero charges?"

There have been many calls to reform CNKI in recent years. During the 2020 two sessions, China's top legislative meetings, Ni Minjing, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee, suggested that CNKI should become open access for domestic users for browsing and downloading papers, while

continuing to charge for other services including paper reviews, plagiarism checks, paper citation retrieval and big data services.

Jia Kang and Feng Xiaoqing both said that CNKI should look at the international experience. In 2019, the University of California attempted to cancel its subscription to Elsevier, a leading global academic journal publisher, because of its high prices, a common complaint among academics worldwide. This led to negotiations and Elsevier attempted to allow open access to its databases. After two years of negotiations, Elsevier finally gave in by lowering its subscription fees and making the University of California's research freely available to everyone.

"If the database platform, universities and authors can establish a reasonable benefit balancing mechanism, they'll achieve a win-win situation," Feng said.

Enterprises with public data resources have an increasing impact on the public interest. Experts from academic circles told *ChinaReport* that they acknowledge the significant role CNKI has played in knowledge dissemination and expect it to reform.

In response to a *ChinaReport* inquiry about copyright, cost and other related issues, CNKI responded in early May that the company is preparing a series of measures and will issue new principles soon.

In response to the SAMR probe, CNKI issued a statement the same day that it would support the investigation and cooperate fully. CNKI said that it would conduct a self-examination and operate according to laws and regulations and bear social responsibilities as a knowledge infrastructure in China. It further pledged to build itself into a world-class academic database with Chinese characteristics and promote academic exchanges and technological innovations, and vowed to provide better services for authors and its readers. ★



Anti-Counterfeit Drive

PHOTO BY XCG

Customs officers in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province, watch as more than 60,000 intercepted counterfeit items are crushed, June 17, 2020

FAKED CRUSADERS

With the rise of abusive anti-counterfeit practices among China's fake-goods hunters, some of the country's well-known consumer crusaders wonder if there is still a future for them

By Li Mingzi

At just 19, Chen Zhiqiang, a resident of Xuwen County, Guangdong Province, has gained a certain notoriety as China's youngest fake-goods hunter. These are people who make a living from buying counterfeit or problematic products to squeeze vendors and manufacturers by either filing complaints to authorities or suing them in court, even if they claim they are acting in the public interest.

Since turning 18, the minimum age of contractual capacity, Chen has filed more than 800 lawsuits against vendors and manufacturers, particularly targeting the food industry. Although only a few cases

were upheld, Chen earned over 100,000 yuan (US\$14,750) through his endeavours, not bad for someone who just graduated high school.

But Chen's fortunes may have come to an end. In December 2021, a court in Xuwen ruled against him, saying that his frequent lawsuits in the past year amount to abusive litigation, and that he was now under investigation for allegedly blackmailing local merchants.

Chen's last case involved the purchase of a snack from an online vendor for 30 yuan (US\$4.4). He sued the vendor for failing to provide a quality certificate.

Most of his 800 cases involved small amounts of money, and many

of those he attempts to sue settle out of court for a small amount.

The case quickly caused a stir among professional counterfeits hunters, with many concerned the legal environment for this controversial profession has turned hostile.

No Quality Control

Fake-goods hunters first appeared in the mid-1990s, a time when counterfeit products were everywhere in China, but there were almost no intellectual property protection laws. To address the issue, the government issued the country's first consumer rights protection law, which took effect on January 1, 1994.

The law stipulates that if a business is found to have committed fraud while providing a product or service, the customer is legally entitled to compensation up to twice what they paid. The rationale is to provide incentives for customers to take legal action against vendors and manufacturers of counterfeit and problematic products to balance the relationship between consumers and business owners.

He Shan, a civil law expert who helped draft the law, was a major supporter of punitive measures back then, arguing that authorities needed to provide incentives to mobilise the public to take part in the fight against counterfeit goods.

He did not just argue for such measures, he took action. In 1996, He bought two paintings he knew to be fake from an art dealer in Beijing, who claimed they were works of Xu Beihong, a famous Chinese modern artist. He sued the art dealer and was awarded 5,800 yuan (US\$855), twice the amount he paid). The case was China's first lawsuit to award punitive compensation based on the new consumer law, and it is considered a landmark case.

But He was not the first to take advantage of the consumer rights protection law. That honour goes to Wang Hai, a resident of Qingdao, East China's Shandong Province. Wang is recognised as China's first professional fake hunter. In March 1995, Wang Hai bought 12 pairs of counterfeit Sony headphones from a shopping mall for about 1,000 yuan (US\$147). After filing a complaint to commerce authorities in Beijing, he was compensated twice what he paid.

Wang realised he could make a living out of it. Within five months, Wang earned 8,000 yuan (US\$1,189), which at that time was equivalent to almost twice the average annual disposable income of China's urban residents. In December 1995, the China Consumers Association designated Wang as China's first "anti-counterfeit warrior" and awarded him 5,000 yuan (US\$737).

Wang's success attracted a long line of copycat fake hunters, and it quickly became a full-time profession. Wang Jianlei, a former consumer rights journalist who joined the anti-counterfeit business in 2002, recalled that the 1990s was a period when Chinese consumers



Wang Hai, known as China's first "anti-counterfeit warrior" gives a speech on consumer rights protection at Peking University, Beijing, March 17, 2005

"woke up" to their rights. "Back then, fake-goods hunters were like heroes," Zhao told *ChinaReport*, "I can still name a dozen of them."

But the boom of for-profit fake hunting led to controversy, as some legal experts argued they were not ordinary consumers, but profit-seeking business owners who should not fall under the consumer rights protection law.

Then when a Beijing court sentenced Zang Jiaping from Shandong Province who focused on fake medicine to three years in jail for blackmail in December 2003, it marked a major turning point in the authorities' support for the fake hunters. Many believed that their honeymoon period was over.

Hard to Digest

Things quickly changed in 2008 with the infamous contaminated baby milk powder scandal. The case, which led to the poisoning of some 300,000 children and the deaths of six due to products being adulterated with melamine, involved the Sanlu Group, one of China's biggest dairy producers as well as many smaller producers. As the authorities moved to address food safety issues, it became a watershed moment for China's consumer protection law. Sanlu went bankrupt

after the scandal. Tian Wenhua, Sanlu's chairwoman was convicted for "producing and selling fake products" and received a life sentence in 2009. Reports suggest she may be released later this year for good behaviour.

In 2009, the country passed the food safety law, which entitled buyers of substandard food products to compensation of up to 10 times what they paid. "It means 1,000 percent profit [for fake-goods hunters], and it's all legal," Zhao told *ChinaReport*. As a result, the number of professional fake-goods hunters rose "exponentially" in the following years, and most of them focused on the food industry, Zhao said.

Referring to the seven or eight years after 2009 as the "golden age," Zhao said he mostly targeted big brands, such as Coca-Cola. "As long as there were problems such as mislabelling, the court would support you. A single case could lead to 1 million yuan (US\$147,490) in compensation," said Zhao.

On December 9, 2013, the Supreme People's Court issued an interpretation of the food safety law, stipulating that food and medicine manufacturers and sellers cannot defend themselves in lawsuits based on pre-meditation of buyers, giving support to fake hunters.

"This legal interpretation officially recognised professional fake hunters as consumers who simply chose to actively and frequently protect their rights," said Du Peng, a lawyer from the Shanghai-based Zhongkai Law Firm.

In 2014, China amended its consumer rights protection law, increasing the amount of compensation from twice to four times the amount paid by a consumer, which pushed the fake-goods hunting industry to a new height.

According to Liu Junhai, a law professor from the Beijing-based Renmin University of China, the punitive clause in the consumer rights protection law nurtured a group of smart consumers who served as a deterrent against food security violations and helped create a healthy and clean business environment.

Abusive Litigation

As more and more people joined in, many of them opportunists, the business of fake-busting saturated. Many targeted small businesses and resorted to abusive practices or even criminal activities, like becoming fakers themselves by actively fabricating evidence.

According to Zhao Jianglei, some fake-goods hunters are fakes themselves. Zhao said some go to shops and look for food products that are about to expire and hide them at the back of the shelves. After the product expires, they return to buy them, then file complaints and lawsuits. "Inevitably, the high profit margins of the anti-counterfeit industry attracted many ill-intentioned individuals," Zhao said.

For many small business owners, the emergence of fake-goods hunters has become a major risk. Xiang Jianhua, a tea vendor in Chongqing told *ChinaReport* about his ordeal.



Law enforcement officials share the latest anti-counterfeit regulations at a tea plantation, Rongshui Miao Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, March 11

In late 2019, three customers frequented his tea shop, but never when he was there. They showed no interest in his tea products and insisted on buying a limited-edition tea displayed in his shop. The salesperson told them the tea was packaged in 2015 and not for sale.

To deter the customers, Xiang instructed the salesperson to say it had no real market value, and if they insisted on buying it, they would have to pay 100,000 yuan (US\$15,748). To his surprise, the customers agreed and everything seemed fine. However, the salesperson noticed the customer's hand was shaking when he entered his bank card pin number.

After about six months, Xiang received a court summons, notifying him the buyers had sued him for selling expired tea, as the label on the packaging read it had a shelf life of 36 months.

Xiang had no experience with lawsuits and was ill-prepared. The court ruled against him and awarded the plaintiffs 1 million yuan (US\$1,500) 10 times the amount they paid. But Xiang said the tea was fermented and had a long shelf life. In Chinese tea culture, fermented teas are like fine wines or whiskies – the more aged, the better. It is common for valuable teas to be decades old.

Xiang appealed. This time, he was backed by a Chinese tea association, which testified that the expiration date on the tea product was the recommended best taste period, and passing the date did not make it substandard. This tipped the balance in Xiang's favour.



PHOTO BY YCG

Despite his win, Xiang has become very cautious about expensive orders. He handles any transactions over 1,000 yuan (US\$147) himself, and no longer offers sample packets to customers. “These abusive lawsuits seriously undermine trust between businesses and customers and will cause long-term damage to the business environment,” Xiang said.

Xiang said he was not the only victim. Preparing for his countersuit, Xiang joined a local group of tea vendors who had fallen victim to similar schemes. Xiang estimated there were more than 200 vendors in the group and each was dealing with at least one lawsuit.

Up or Down?

As the issue becomes more contentious, food businesses are pushing back against some laws. At the 2017 annual session of the National People’s Congress (NPC), China’s top law-making body, NPC delegate Yang Guoxiu and head of Hunan Guoxiu, a fruit product manufacturer, submitted a proposal for the Supreme People’s Court to stop supporting buyers of problematic products when there is substantial evidence they are aware of the problems before making the purchase.

In response, the Supreme People’s Court said it would scale down its support to “profited-oriented” anti-counterfeit professionals in

lawsuits in industries other than the food and medicine industry.

According to Zhao, the success rate for plaintiffs in fake-goods cases immediately dropped. “In the past, the win rate for us was about 60-70 percent,” Zhao said, “But now, it has dropped to about 10 percent.” Zhao said in most recent cases, fake hunters were no longer considered consumers, but rather were seen as profit seekers.

But it appears courts in different areas adopt different approaches. Yan Bin (pseudonym), a veteran fake goods hunter, also felt the squeeze. Yan said he usually targeted fake-goods sold online and would receive the goods in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, where he sued the vendors. But in recent years, courts in Shenzhen became increasingly reluctant to accept Yan’s cases. Last year, Yan moved to Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region neighbouring Guangdong, where the courts remain receptive to anti-counterfeit cases, he said.

Another fake-goods hunter Peng Bo (pseudonym) told *ChinaReport* that courts in Beijing noticeably changed their stance on anti-counterfeit cases starting in mid-2019. He moved to Shanghai, where he filed over 30 lawsuits, most of which were backed by Shanghai courts.

According to Wang Hai, who now owns four companies, it is time for the anti-counterfeit fighters to fight against the scammers among them. In 2019, Wang’s team exposed an account called “big pig group” on social media, which had continuously posted advertisements to recruit “apprentices,” teaching them how to put flies into food or threaten and blackmail business owners. In 2021, Wang claimed on his Weibo account that police had arrested the people operating the scheme.

As for the latest case of fake-hunting teen Chen Zhiqiang, Wang said recently on social media that Chen sometimes did not know what he was doing. “In some cases, Chen even accused food producers that use only domestically produced ingredients of failing to have import licences for certain ingredients,” Wang said.

Wang Hai, however, remains optimistic about the future of the anti-counterfeit business. “The recent crackdown on abusive litigation can promote the healthy development of the industry,” he said.

In the past couple of years, Wang has shifted his anti-counterfeit business to China’s livestream vendors. In November 2020, Wang made headlines by exposing that bird’s nest products sold by Xinba, one of China’s top livestreamers who had achieved total sales of 8.8 billion yuan (US\$1.3b) during the annual November 11 online shopping festival, were nothing but “sugar water.” A month later, market regulators fined Xinba 900,000 yuan (US\$132,743) and suspended his account for 60 days.

Then in December 2020, Wang sued Luo Yonghao, another top livestreamer, for false advertising, after he sold a domestically made personal hygiene product as an imported one. Wang sought 250 million yuan (US\$36.9m) in a class action lawsuit. “For the genuine anti-counterfeit fighters, now is the best time for business,” Wang said. ★



Migrant Child Education

Life Lessons

Despite its acclaimed educational approach and reputation, a groundbreaking preschool for migrant workers' children in Beijing remains trapped by status and financial dilemmas

By Li Jing

Every morning at 9 am, children flock to a small courtyard house in an old alley in downtown Beijing – their kindergarten. Unlike the child-friendly facilities of standard kindergartens, Sihuan Playgroup in Dabanjie Hutong in the city's central Xicheng District looks a bit shabby, decorated only with handcrafted ornaments. But for preschoolers between 3 and 6 from

migrant worker families, who cannot enrol in public schools or afford private kindergartens, this childcare centre registered as an NGO, is a haven. "If it wasn't for this playgroup, I might not have had a happy childhood," said Nini, who is now attending junior high in nearby Hebei Province, where she comes from.

On April 7, Sihuan Playgroup celebrated

its 18th anniversary. Parents and grandparents put on skits and performances with the children. "This year there weren't as many as usual because of the pandemic. We used to get many graduates and their parents returning for the reunion. Some even travelled a long way from their hometowns," said Zhang Yixue, one of the teachers.

Looking back, Zhang Yan, founder of



PHOTO BY LI JING

Sihuan Playgroup holds outdoor activities every week

Sihuan Playgroup and a retired professor of early education at Beijing Normal University, said she did not expect the playgroup would last 18 years considering the challenges it has faced. Offering a unique teaching approach, the school not only offers a place for children who struggle to get into kindergartens as they are not from Beijing, it also enrolls local children who have more choices, since with a Beijing residency permit, they can access local services such as schools and hospitals. But even now, the preschool is still not officially recognised as a kindergarten or education institution, and constantly battles financial difficulties. “We can only wait and see, one step at a time,” Zhang Yan told *ChinaReport*.

For the Children

Shen Lamei, who came to Beijing from Anhui Province in 2004, said her eldest son managed to get into a public kindergarten

in 2013. But by 2018, when her second son reached preschool age, conditions for non-Beijing resident permit holders to be enrolled in public school were tightened. The cost of a private kindergarten, around 4,000 yuan (US\$612) a month, was too much for the family, who makes their living from a small shop. A neighbour suggested Sihuan Playgroup, which accepted children for free. “It’s not like other kindergartens and my son likes it,” Shen told *ChinaReport*.

The non-profit organisation originated from field research Zhang Yan carried out in 2004, when she was a college professor focused on community education. When Zhang learned from a student that many children whose parents worked in an inner-city Beijing wet market did not go to preschool, she went to see for herself.

At the market, she discovered over 80 preschoolers, most of whom were not in formal childcare. They were the children of vegetable vendors, whose lives revolved around the market.

Like Shen, some parents tried to enrol their kids, but many public kindergartens require work, residence and social security certificates to prove they are entitled to the service, which low-income migrant workers have difficulty providing. Their unsociable hours – rising early to go to wholesale markets for stock – meant they had difficulty with the extra chore of taking their children to and from school.

Zhang decided to set up a childcare centre near the market, which would also allow her to explore methods of informal preschool education in China. She thought a preschool playgroup would work, a kind of less formal method that started in the UK in the 1960s which has become an important part of education in Europe and the US. Preschool playgroups are mainly financed, managed and led by parents, who take turns as the teacher.

On April 7, 2004, Zhang Yan and her students took the children to a nearby courtyard which belonged to the market and held their first activity. The courtyard, which the

market provided for free, became their school for the next six years.

Over time, the playgroup’s reputation attracted other parents, even those with Beijing residency documents, who felt their children could not enrol or be accepted at mainstream preschools. These include children with physical impairments or children on the autism spectrum.

Zhang and her graduate students have been exploring teaching methods suitable for migrant children at Sihuan Playgroup. She encourages her students to work as volunteers, where they would summarise activities and write teaching journals, as well as write research papers related to the playgroup.

The teaching methods are based in theory and are suited to the practical situation of vendors. They stress the importance of good manners, rural culture and using everyday resources in teaching, instead of copying academic teaching methods for urban children. Zhang emphasised reading, oral and social skills they might lack otherwise.

Sihuan Playgroup mixes different ages, so older children can help the younger ones. It adopts the Montessori method, an education philosophy that aims for self-motivated growth and nurtures children’s natural desire for knowledge. The method, pioneered by Italian physician Maria Montessori at the turn of the 20th century, stresses collaborative play and encourages children to develop their own interests.

Every day they start with reading and exercise, followed by Montessori activities where teachers offer guidance as students maintain autonomy.

The children do a lot of outdoor activities, mostly in nearby parks. “Children from this school are healthy and outgoing. Several of them can run three kilometres with me along the lake,” said Tang Haifeng, a physical education teacher from Beijing Normal University who volunteers at the playgroup.

Parents are hands-on at Sihuan Playgroup, where they join reading clubs and lessons and take turns to be on duty.

Giving Agency

Zhang Yan said they want to give agency to the parents, not hand them solutions on a plate. “There’s no saviour. We’re not a saviour either. They need to be their own saviours,” Zhang said.

Parents initially had trouble accepting this approach. Many have to stand at their market stall all day long, leaving them little extra time and energy to teach. So volunteers would go to their stalls after school to discuss their children and family situation. The volunteers sometimes helped watch the stalls to free them up. Gradually, these parents, who previously were only focused on their livelihoods, paid more attention to their children’s education. They kept journals and engaged with other parents. Those who stood out were selected as honorary presidents of the school.

“In creating the playgroup, equal partnerships in which all involved can dialogue is the first step. The parent committee has been critical to playgroup from the beginning,” Zhang Yan said.

Zhang Yixue, one of the parent-teachers, told *ChinaReport* that the group has helped enlighten many parents about education. “When children graduate from the school, so do the parents,” she said.

He Xiang, who sells seasonings at a food market, was president of Sihuan Playgroup for four years. He wrote a lot of parenting journals, once detailing how he resisted the urge to scold his son after he spilled an entire bag of peanuts, a show of respect and patience. Parents were developing new strengths, just as Zhang Yan and her students intended.

Approaching retirement in 2011, 60-year-old Zhang Yan, enrolled her last cohort of graduate students at her university, a major source of playgroup volunteers. Since then, it has been more important to recruit teachers from among the parents.

Ding Fengyun, whose daughter Nini attended the playgroup, was the second parent-teacher. After she had children, she worked part time as a housekeeper. At first, she was not confident. But Zhang Yan



Parents, students and former students celebrate Sihuan Playgroup’s 18th anniversary, Beijing, April 7

PHOTO BY LI JING

encouraged her, organising weekly classes for volunteers and teachers where they could discuss problems and make lesson plans. During her eight years at the playgroup, Ding earned a bachelor’s degree and her preschool teaching certificate. In 2021, she moved away and left the playgroup. She now directs a private childcare centre.

The playgroup has trained eight parent-teachers, three of whom are still working there full time. They write articles about the children’s progress for a Japanese website on early child education. The website started publishing the articles over 10 years ago and pays them US\$20,000 every year.

Liu Xiangying, professor of comparative education at Fukuyama City University in Japan, has visited Sihuan Playgroup many times with her students. She feels that while encouraging parents to be teachers might be the only choice for the playgroup, they are as good as, or even better than, teachers with professional training because they embody the essence of preschool education – “they care for the children.”

Even if they attend preschool in Beijing, most children of migrant workers who do not have a Beijing residency permit eventually return to their hometowns for education, since they can only take examinations,

including for university entrance, in the place they are registered, which is usually where they were born. But for Sihuan’s students, their experience has far-reaching influence on their lives.

Nini, who is now in her second year of middle school, talks of happy times at the playgroup that made her feel positive about school in general. The president sold herbs and spices, while the writer of their school song sold steamed buns. The students, though of different ages, formed close bonds. She is not intimidated by teachers or going to school. She remembers the playgroup would assign a story every day for bedtime reading. Her parents were too busy to read to her, so she read by herself and gradually developed a reading habit.

Aware of the significance of companionship for children, He Xiang returned with his children to his hometown in Hunan Province in 2014, even though they could have stayed with their grandparents. In 2016, He returned to Beijing to attend the Sihuan Playgroup’s 12th anniversary. “The days in the playgroup have influenced parents and children for life,” He said.

Struggling to Survive

By 2018, Sihuan Playgroup had enrolled

more than 31,200 children, with 6,240 university students volunteering and nearly 100 researching the playgroup. Its educational approaches have been increasingly welcomed. In 2012, Beijing's education authorities entrusted Sihuan Playgroup to train nearly 100 volunteers and teachers for informal childcare centers on the city's rural fringes. In 2016, the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) named the playgroup as an innovator in preschool education among developing countries, the only one from China.

Despite its reputation, the playgroup has been struggling to survive for years.

At first, the playgroup remained at the Sihuan Market courtyard from which it took its name. However, it had to close every time Beijing held big events or public activities. In 2010, the playgroup experienced its longest closure after a series of campus safety incidents triggered a large-scale safety check. The subdistrict office required the market to strengthen safety regulations. Since the playgroup was not registered, the market was no longer willing to risk supporting it, and took the space back in May 2010.

Volunteers and parents kept searching

for a new space. A year later, they found the current location in Dabanjie Hutong, which they rent for 6,800 yuan (US\$1,040) a month in six-month chunks. The expense came as a blow to the playgroup, whose only fees had been printing class materials and transport for volunteers, all of which Zhang Yan's research grant covered.

The parents started to contribute 150 yuan (US\$23) each month for rent, and a language training institution offered them 50,000 yuan (US\$7,645). Today, parents contribute 800 yuan (US\$122), as rent and prices continue to rise.

The playgroup's closure from 2010 to 2011 made volunteers realise the importance of identity. Ma Nan, a student of Zhang Yan and volunteer, said the playgroup was unable to register as a commercial entity in 2008, because the market refused to provide them with a deed to the property. In Dabanjie Hutong, even though the landlord provided the deed, they ran into other documentation issues. The playgroup tried to register as an NGO, but was also unsuccessful.

In 2014 things started to improve after Li Yuanxiang, who worked with NGOs, joined the playgroup. In 2016, Sihuan Playgroup

eventually registered as an NGO – a community service centre that could host parent-child activities. Li, now the legal representative for the playgroup, said there was a brief window in 2016 when registration policies suddenly relaxed before tightening up again.

“To be honest, the whole thing was accidental. If we missed that chance, we'd never have got it,” Li told *ChinaReport*.

In September 2014, the market where Sihuan Playgroup started was demolished as part of a citywide campaign to move wholesale markets to the outskirts. The playgroup lost some students. Meanwhile, the rent kept rising.

At present, the playgroup's daily expenses are covered by Zhang's research grant, fees she and volunteers receive from books and articles and occasional donations. But lately, donations from enterprises have dried up since the playgroup had to suspend its programmes because of the pandemic.

Because it operates in a residential area, the playgroup is very careful to stay in the good graces of surrounding neighbours. Tang Haifeng told *ChinaReport* that the teachers visit their neighbours every year with gifts. Parents fetch their children between 12 and 2 pm to avoid disturbing the elderly residents' afternoon naps.

By the end of 2020, there were 6.4 million children left behind in rural areas by parents who had to move to urban areas for work. A few years ago, Zhang Yan said she dreamed the Sihuan Playgroup model would spread – mothers could return to villages to start their own kindergartens and migrant worker families could organise playgroups in cities. But Zhang Yan is fully aware of the challenges.

“We can only take one step at a time and see. Education is not isolated. It is closely related to the economy, population and policies,” she said.

Tang hopes there will be more places like Sihuan Playgroup that allow children to stay with their parents in cities. “Even though migrant children face a lot of difficulties, their situation will be far better than the ones left behind,” Tang said. ★



A migrant worker and her child in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, January 17, 2010



Private Technology University

PHOTO BY CNS



HIGH-TECH VOCATION

A private technology university aims to reverse the poor reputation of vocational education and introduce new training techniques, but it will need government support

By Du Wei and Xie Ying

Cao Dewang, known in China as the “King of Glass,” looks set to realise his dream of revolutionising the system of vocational higher education in China.

Founder and president of Fuyao Group, a world-leading glass manufacturer, Cao broke ground on a private university, provisionally named Fuyao Technology University, in May 2022. Financed by Heren Charity Foundation that Cao also founded, the university is in his hometown, Fuzhou, capital of South China’s Fujian Province.

According to Cao, now 75, Fuyao Technology University will be based on Germany’s dual system of vocational education and training to provide graduates to meet the needs of enterprises. The dual system combines academic tutoring in the classroom and practical training in firms.

The principles of cooperation between schools and enterprises and

industry-education integration were proposed in China years ago, but not implemented well, leading to a lack of trained workers across many fields. According to a guideline for talent training issued by China’s Ministry of Education in 2017, the skills shortage is estimated to reach nearly 30 million in China’s top 10 manufacturing sectors by 2025, particularly in IT, power equipment and automated machine tools.

“My purpose in establishing this university is not so China has yet another university, but for reform and exploration,” Cao said at the eighth annual conference of the China Education 30 Forum held at the end of 2021 in Beijing.

Some educators believe that an institution like Fuyao Technology University could be a pioneer in training applied talent, a weakness of general universities and other vocational schools often criticised



PHOTO BY CNS

Left: Students at a vocational school learn machining skills, Handan, Hebei Province, December 9, 2021

Right: A student at a technical school works on a circuit board, Yongji, Shanxi Province, May 19, 2015

for being a drag on the development of industry. But its success will depend on how the reform is implemented and how much government support it gets.

Cao's Dream

Heren Charity Foundation, according to media reports, began reducing its equity in the Fuyao Group in February, with funds directed to construction of the university. The first tranche of the money, 10 billion yuan (US\$1.5b), is for campus construction.

Cao has set up scholarships and bursaries in domestic universities since the 1990s and donated towards university libraries and institutes. But it was a trip to Germany that first inspired him. Cao said he was impressed by the high production standards of even small enterprises due to the country's rigorous dual training system in specialised universities. In media interviews, he often spoke of his concerns over China's lack of senior engineers and factory managers, saying that graduates from domestic universities and colleges have poor practical skills.

"We aim to train 'artisans' in engineering and management... We want to advocate the dual-tutor system. On one hand, the university teaches knowledge, on the other, enterprises send their technicians to teach practical skills," Cao told *ChinaReport*. "We have to equip our students with both thinking ability and practical skills and inject them with confidence, so they can work as engineers after they graduate," he added.

Fuyao Technology University chose a site in Liuzhou Island in

southwestern Fuzhou, close to a high-tech industrial zone and Fuzhou University Zone, where there are 13 universities and colleges.

Fuyao Technology University plans to recruit its first batch of 240-480 undergraduates in July 2023, and by 2033, it envisions a student body of 6,000 undergrads and 6,000 postgrads. So far, there is no mention of how much it will cost students to attend, or if there will be scholarships.

Zhu Chongshi, retired president of Xiamen University, also in Fujian Province, will take the helm of the new university. He said Fuyao Technology University will offer six majors at first, including material science and engineering, information and automation, vehicles and traffic engineering, mechanics and smart manufacturing, environment and ecology, and finance and management. The university will encourage students to intern in labs, practical training centres or plants and enterprises during summer and winter holidays.

"An advantage of Fuyao Technology University is that I am an entrepreneur and I know what to teach our students and what fields we need to offer," Cao told *ChinaReport*. He intends to invite presidents from prestigious universities at home and abroad to form the board of directors.

According to Dr. Que Mingkun, a researcher at the Institute of National Institutions, Zhejiang University, cooperation between universities and enterprises is usually formalistic. "Universities are academic organisations and enterprises are economic organisations that want to maximise profits. Their values don't really match. Many university teachers look down on the corporate world, and they end up being very much junior partners in any cooperation," he said.

Zhu told *ChinaReport* that universities' talent training lags behind the development of enterprises. "When universities train people based on the enterprise demands they understand, they find businesses are already ahead of the curve. They can't keep up," he said. "Getting actual experience for students was the biggest challenge for me when I served as president [of Xiamen University]. I found it very difficult for our students to find an internship, as companies feel it's a burden to guide and teach an intern. So I'll put more efforts into internships at Fuyao University," he said.

Exploited Workers

Chinese media is full of reports of firms exploiting young interns as cheap labour, where they are ordered to do low-level tasks. But companies counter that students are not prepared for technical jobs based on their classroom learning.

That is why Zhu emphasises the importance of making clear the demands of the enterprises and keeping a "seamless connection" with them. He insists the university's board of directors will comprise educators and entrepreneurs and they will also invite senior managers of leading enterprises to form a consulting committee. Zhu hopes that Fuyao Technology University will attract more en-

terprise support based on Cao's reputation.

Analysts warn there will be many practical difficulties to achieving this aim.

"They have to make clear how many out-of-school tutors [from firms] they need to support the full capacity of 12,000 students, how to define who is qualified and how to appraise and pay them. It's actually a problem with operation modes and appraisal systems. And, the current system universities use may conflict with that used by enterprises," Yan Fengqiao, dean of the Graduate School of Education, Peking University, told *ChinaReport*.

Wang Yitao, director of the Research Centre of Non-Governmental Education, Suzhou University, agreed it would be hard to integrate non-academic teachers from outside the regular system. "Most domestic universities value academic achievements when appraising talents, including their educational background, their academic titles and the number of papers they've published," he told *ChinaReport*.

Cao favours the German model of Fachhochschule – universities of applied sciences, which focus on subjects like engineering, computer science, design and other professional subjects. They grant undergrad and postgrad degrees, but also have close links with industry and prioritise hands-on work experience. The faculty must have both teaching and practical skills, and have worked for several years outside academia.

Teachers like this are rare in China. Even in Germany, its Fachhochschulen face challenges. It is becoming harder to recruit faculty as the number of students grows. According to a 2017 report by German public broadcaster ARD, when recruiting teachers, Fachhochschulen may lose out to companies and other universities. The report also pointed out that Fachhochschulen, which have highly subdivided majors and professional education, may not adapt to the fast-changing market.

Zhu said they are still designing the core majors, which they will adjust according to what skills enterprises need.

"For example, we'll consider setting up one or several majors that target enterprises in Fujian or Zhejiang Province, or in the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta areas. This is what Fuyao Technology University wants to explore, a system that supports more flexible and adaptable major designs," Zhu said, stressing they will ensure the stability of majors.

Yan thinks this will be difficult to achieve. "It's very wise and farsighted to dynamically adjust majors according to social demands, but it's very difficult, since it takes a lot of time to create a major system, and once established, it's hard to change it," Yan said.

Although Cao expects Fuyao Technology University to target worldwide enterprises, experts like Que and Yan suggest it should focus on local industries and resources, since it is easier to connect with local enterprises who like to recruit local graduates to save costs.



Needed Pioneer

Since Cao proposed his university, the school has attracted nationwide attention. Although neither Cao nor the Fuzhou government has defined Fuyao University as a vocational school, many analysts expect it to be a pioneer in vocational education, given its high emphasis on enterprise demands.

Since 1985, China has repeatedly stated its policy of enrolling a proper rate of students in vocational schools after they complete junior high school, which comes at the end of the nine-year period of free compulsory education. But since universities started expanding in the 1990s, the ratio of vocational high school students to high school students has constantly fallen. Vocational high schools have lost their social status and find it hard to recruit good students and teachers. Vocational colleges are in the same predicament. Given they usually recruit students based on the same national examinations as universities, they are considered a safe choice for students not eligible for universities.

But as the number of university graduates grows, it is increasingly hard to find a decent job. According to a 2020 survey on the difficulty graduates have finding employment conducted by a research team led by the Development Research Centre of the State Council, among all university graduates and postgraduates who had not signed an employment contract by June 2020, 65.6 percent only had a first degree, nearly 40 percent higher than junior college graduates, eight times that of those with a master's and 470 times that of PhDs. Meanwhile, businesses complained it was difficult to recruit good workers or technicians. The Ministry of Education (MoE) has emphasised the need



PHOTO BY CHINA CONSTRUCTION THIRD ENGINEERING BUREAU GROUP CO., LTD

Pictured is the final design concept for Fuyao Technology University. Construction began on May 14 and is scheduled for completion in June 2023.

to keep a suitable ratio of vocational high school students, pledging to improve vocational schools and enhance their social status.

This did little to ease parents' worries that their children would have to attend a vocational school after completing junior high school, since parents persistently view vocational schools, especially vocational high schools, as a repository for badly behaved students, low-quality teachers and poor management and teaching.

During the 2022 two sessions, China's main annual legislative meetings, Feng Yi, a delegate to the National People's Congress, China's highest legislature, proposed adding high school education to the compulsory education system of nine years to improve the quality of the workforce.

Other delegates proposed students should not be streamed into regular high schools and vocational schools through national high school entrance exams. The delegates believe that rather than starting work in factories or other enterprises at a young age, students should receive more regular and standardised education.

But at a press conference during the two sessions, MoE official Chen Ziji emphasised the necessity of this separation, saying vocational education is an important part of high school education which enables students of different potential to find a development path that suits them, and it helps promote employment and regional economies. Chen said the MoE is setting up a system for a national entrance exam specially targetting vocational high school students to help them access further education. According to Chen, the MoE will continue to improve vocational colleges and universities and encourage them to expand recruitment based on this exam.

In 2019, the MoE approved 15 vocational colleges to be upgraded to universities and by 2021, at least 22 vocational colleges had become universities. Also in 2019, the MoE issued a document on reforming vocational education, which said that vocational education is of equal importance to regular high school education.

Against this backdrop, Fuyao Technology University could provide an alternative path for vocational education, but it faces challenges in introducing its new model of higher education due to the entrenched university system. It will need firm support from education authorities, analysts said.

"The biggest challenge is whether or not we can really be pioneering and how much room there is for us to make these changes," Zhu said.

"Enjoying more freedom is a fundamental guarantee of realising and keeping Fuyao University's features and the relationship between the school and the government will determine the degree of freedom," Yan told *ChinaReport*.

When Fuyao Technology University was first put on the agenda of Heren Charity Foundation in May 2021, it was defined as "a public university that explores new operation modes" in an article published on the charity's WeChat account.

In another article published in November 2021, Heren Charity Foundation redefined Fuyao Technology University as a "new private and non-profit high-end university focusing on technological application and research." Analysts believe the change in mission statement indicates a greater degree of operational freedom.

"Seen from historical policies, promoting integration of vocational education and ordinary higher education is a major part of industry-education integration, and private schools are expected to be the biggest implementer of such integration," commented a report by Industrial Equality cited by stcn.com, an industrial news website.

Chinese media reported that Fuyao Technology University has received significant backing from Fujian provincial government, which has provided 0.8 square kilometres of land and 10 billion yuan (US\$1.5b) in capital.

The municipal government of Fuzhou has promised to allocate 300-500 million yuan (US\$46.2-76.9m) annually to bring in skilled professionals from overseas. The institution is mentioned often in provincial and municipal government documents on education or city development, making analysts optimistic about the project and its impact on education reform.

"If China continues to pursue reform and opening-up and deals with the relationship between the government, markets and society well, more and more social organisations and individuals will be encouraged to promote educational reform and private education will develop better," Yan said. "But there might also be external factors that influence the effect of university reform, so it will still be a long time before we see clear changes [in private education]," he added. ★

Film Industry

Screen Test

Cinemas are struggling to survive amid waves of Covid-19 lockdowns, but analysts say the pandemic has only shed light on preexisting woes – and an industry reshuffle is in order

By Ni Wei and Xu Pengyuan



People watch the film *Chinese Doctors* in a near-empty cinema, Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, July 9, 2021

PHOTO BY IC

“The other shoe has finally dropped. Cinemas will close as of today,” Dong Wenxin, general manager of cinema Palace in Jinan, Shandong Province, posted to her WeChat on March 30. On the same day, the city reported four confirmed Covid-19 cases.

She told *ChinaReport* that over the past month, her cinema sold less than 10 tickets per day and their monthly revenue does not cover the rent. Dong said some other cinemas in the city had it worse, some selling only four tickets per day. “It was no better than being shut down,” Dong said.

Recent rounds of Omicron in Chinese cities since March have devastated attendances. Data from ticketing app Denga showed that Chinese box offices raked in 295 million yuan (US\$45.4m) over the Labour Day holi-

day (April 30-May 4), only 17.6 percent of earnings over the same period in 2021. On March 24, China’s box office revenues fell below 10 million yuan (US\$1.5m), averaging 50 tickets per cinema or 1.8 viewers per film – the poorest showing in 10 years apart from when cinemas reopened in 2020.

Empty Cinemas

Beyond the pandemic, analysts blame reduced investment and lack of quality films, which were already issues before the pandemic. Audiences are not only avoiding the pandemic but also poor quality films. This trend has been clear over the past two years. When cinemas reopened after Covid-19 first hit, many welcomed their return. This time, there is much less fanfare and enthusiasm.

Cinemas remained open in 2021,

raking in 47.3 billion yuan (US\$7.3b), about 74 percent of box office earnings in 2019, according to an industry survey by ticketing app Denga. During the 24th Shanghai International Film Festival in June 2021, Zeng Maojun, president of Wanda Pictures, told media that 2022 would be a “big year for the film industry.”

So far, it has not. Even before Jinan tightened pandemic controls in March, the Palace’s ticket sales were half what they were in 2021. Dong chalked it up to the waning Spring Festival holiday rush and poor film selection. But even during the Spring Festival, box office numbers were abysmal, 23 percent down compared to the same period of the previous year, according to ticketing app Maoyan.

Cinema managers pinned their hopes on

Hollywood blockbuster *The Batman*, scheduled for release on March 18. The same day, the Chinese government announced tightened pandemic controls for cinemas, ordering all cinemas in medium- and high-risk areas to close. According to Dengta, less than 50 percent of China's cinemas were operating in March, the lowest since cinemas resumed operation in May 2020.

Although *The Batman* received positive reviews and reportedly took in US\$677 million globally by mid-April, ticket sales in China were less than 100 million yuan (US\$15.4m) in the first week, according to Dengta. Analysts expect the film's China revenues will not exceed 150 million yuan (US\$23.1m). Yu Chao, deputy manager of Beijing Capital Cinema, told *ChinaReport* that despite keeping all its matinees for *The Batman*, and 22 daily screenings at its branch in the city's Xidan shopping district, 85 percent of seats remained empty.

"Nobody thought the market would get to such a low point," he said.

Reel Shortages

The shrinking audiences are partly due to lack of new films, which also largely stems from pandemic controls. Some analysts warned of the shortage as early as summer 2020 when cinemas resumed operation. Although not immediate thanks to the backlog of postponed premieres during the 2020 pandemic, the shortage was obvious in 2021, as many domestic studios refrained from releasing films.

"We are now very cautious about promoting films," said producer Wang Lei, revealing to *ChinaReport* he postponed one of his releases intended for April and many of his peers have done the same. "We're worried about squandering our money due to recent rounds of controls," he said.

According to Dong, most of the hottest films of 2020 and 2021 were produced before the pandemic. By 2022, almost all postponed releases had been screened, and there were not enough new films to fill the gap.



Pictured is the shuttered Guang'anmen Cinema in Xicheng District, Beijing, October 30, 2021. The district ordered all cinemas in the district to close from October 30 to November 14, 2021

In summer 2021, for example, China's box office plunged to 7.4 billion yuan (US\$1.1b) from 17 billion yuan (US\$2.6b) in the same period of 2019, according to industry data website askci.com. There were no summer blockbusters, with the best-performing film earning 1.3 billion yuan (US\$200m), one-third of the revenue of previous summer season hits.

Over the Tomb Sweeping Festival (April 3-5) this year, only two foreign films screened and eight domestic films were removed from the schedule. A similar situation occurred over the Labour Day holiday in early May.

"Labour Day couldn't even be considered a holiday season this year since many cinemas were shut down and few new films opened," Chen Dan, a director at the Suzhou Motion Picture Association, told financial portal Caijing.

"Cinemas are among the worst hit by the pandemic," Dong said. "Every time a new outbreak comes, cinemas are the first to close and the last to open... It has convinced people it's very risky to go into a cinema," she added.

"If the six-month shutdown [in 2020] was a minor wound, today's shortage of new films is an internal injury that is hard to heal," Wang said. "Even if all cinemas remain

open, they would not have enough films to screen and they would have seen very low attendance."

Slim Selection

He Si, a film buff in Beijing, said the low attendance rates in cinemas are not because of the lack of new films, but the lack of good films.

"I used to go to the films nearly every week, but since this year's Spring Festival, I rarely watch films in the cinema, because few interest me and tickets are so expensive," he said.

"Films on offer in cinemas are not diverse enough in content or style... and those we discuss in fan groups were not approved for screening. Is there any reason for us to go to a cinema?" he said, adding he would rather go to screenings of classic films, since they are worth watching and cheaper.

The lack of variety is clear. Five of the top-10 most successful films of 2020-2021 were patriotic or promoted social rules and mainstream values. None were fantasy or tackled social issues. In contrast, the top-10 titles of 2018-2019 included domestic and imported films that covered genres from fantasy and comedy to rom-coms and sci-fi.

A 2021 survey of 4,000 filmgoers con-

ducted by the Movie and Arts Centre under The China Federation of Literary and Art Circles showed that crime thrillers and films about social issues are the most popular genres. Many respondents agreed that what the Chinese market lacks most is fantasy, sci-fi, mystery, crime and war films. The survey also showed that most filmgoers are older and more financially secure, while younger people prefer online platforms for their diverse catalogs of films, TV and originals. Less than 10 percent of respondents said they watched over 10 films in 2021, citing “no good films” as the major reason.

Also deterring audiences is higher ticket price as film producers seek to recoup losses. Data from the National Film Industry Development Fund showed that in 2021, China’s average ticket price was 40.5 yuan (US\$6), 8.9 percent higher than 2020. Although the 2020 box office rebounded to 74 percent of 2019’s total, cinemas only saw 67.5 percent of 2019’s attendance.

Ticket prices increased again in 2022, with some exceeding 100 yuan (US\$15) during the Spring Festival in February, doubling 2021 and tripling 2018 prices. The price hikes have affected attendance numbers.

“Two people have to spend 300-400 yuan (US\$46-62) to watch a mediocre film. How many people are willing to do that,” He Si told *ChinaReport*. “I hope ticket prices get back to normal. Watching a film shouldn’t be a luxury form of entertainment.”

Dong Wenxin of Palace in Jinan justified the price increase. “Restaurants also increased their prices because of the decrease in customers. How else can they survive?” she said.

But Dong and Yu Chao worry a vicious cycle is emerging, where lack of selection and increasing prices drive away audiences, poor box office performances discourage studios from investment, which further increases ticket prices to cover losses.

Disappearing Act

Yang Qifeng, a film producer who pre-



People line up for a screening of *Avatar*, China National Film Museum, Beijing, January 10, 2010

PHOTO BY CNS

viously managed 60 film cinemas nationwide, told *ChinaReport* he has shifted his investments to short videos. He cites how sci-fi hit *The Wandering Earth*, a 2019 film adapted from *The Three-Body Problem* by author Liu Cixin, made breakthroughs in special effects, but Yang said funding shortages stopped this industry trend short.

“It’s without a doubt a terrible time for film investing,” Fang Li, producer and president of Laurel Films, told *ChinaReport*. “The hot money is gone, especially from investors seeking quick returns. The market is not as extensive and investors have more concerns and care more about fixed returns.”

According to Wang Changtian, president of Enlighten Media, the decline started in the latter half of 2018 after the central government targeted China’s bloated film industry following reports of astronomical fees for actors and rampant tax evasion. Media reports exposed an industry flush with money from pig breeders and vegetable growers, steel producers and firework makers. In 2018, 73 real estate enterprises reportedly launched film studios.

Seeking a quick profit, investors produced low-budget, low-quality films in droves. The atmosphere turned speculative.

“The industry was like gambling,” Song Wen, founder of FIRST International

Film Festival, which promotes the work of young producers and directors, told *ChinaReport*. “When someone earns 3 billion yuan (US\$461.5m) on 100 million-yuan (US\$15.4m) investment. Who wouldn’t be envious? If you had 1 million yuan lying around, what would you do?” Song said.

With the 2018 industry crackdown came sweeping tax audits and tightened supervision of film enterprises. “Many companies couldn’t list on the stock market, so they couldn’t get financing. It led many investors to suffer from a broken capital chain,” Wang Changtian told media during the 2021 Shanghai International Film Festival.

In an interview with *Southern People Weekly* in August 2021, director Lu Chuan described the industry after 2018 as “a land full of sufferers.” He was forced to put up his own money to finish a film after his investor backed out in July 2019. Without funding, his team could not fully resume production until May 2021.

Better Odds

Others see the withdrawal of hot money as positive, arguing the industry can mature and concentrate on producing quality content.

“Good films stand a better chance in a smaller market,” Fang Li said. “As long as we

have good ideas, we could get more people to make quality films. We would rather take a smaller share. It's also a good time to concentrate talent," he added.

Song Wen said FIRST has seen an increase of submitted screenplays during their annual project scouting in recent years, from 732 in 2019 to 916 in 2021. Even in 2020, they received 857 submissions. "This year's number is a record high," Song Wen told *ChinaReport*. "I've found that young people are really producing a lot of screenplays right now, which makes it a good time for storing up work and fostering talent. It's good news."

Song said four studios have turned to him for young directors to make films since Spring Festival, but all of them already have work. "They're in a prolific period. Even the pandemic can't hold them back," he said.

The pandemic also encouraged producers and investors to reevaluate their choices in projects. For example, many studios bet heavily on light-hearted comedies. Director Cai Chengjie told *ChinaReport* he now chooses more touching human stories and said he has mentally prepared himself for low profits.

Song Wen hopes younger directors take on more social issues. "Some producers and directors are trying to avoid realistic topics and make lowbrow slapstick or historical comedies, but this leads audiences to believe that cinemas aren't places for serious film," he said. Also, many in the industry mistakenly believed that young audiences preferred escapism at the cinema. Song pointed to 2020 drama *Dying to Survive*, which tackled the issue of high-priced leukemia drugs, saying the film's 3 billion yuan (US\$461.5m) box office earnings revealed strong demand for films that tackle social issues.

"Audiences may unexpectedly welcome such films after the cinemas fully resume," he said.

Cinemas are exploring ways to increase attendance beyond government stimulus and tax reductions. Fang Li has called for cinemas to move out of shopping malls, a strategy started by real estate giant and film company Wanda 20 years earlier. Fang argued that the high rents shopping malls charge unnecessarily pressured cinemas. "Films should not supplement shopping," he said, adding cinemas should open near residential

communities and operate around the clock.

Others suggested cinemas distinguish themselves with curation rather than display all available options like supermarket shelves. An insider told *ChinaReport* he hoped authorities would give cinemas more freedom to choose what films they screen, including classic films, and allow them to launch their own film festivals.

Some cinemas have taken measures to attract audiences. Beijing Capital Cinema, for example, holds comedy performances and concerts, its monthly crosstalk shows drawing an average of 200 people. Although still falling short of recouping lost film revenues, Yu Chao said their efforts have other value. "It might be a turning point to encourage additional revenue streams," he said.

Although some predict cinemas will keep losing viewers to internet platforms, many analysts believe cinemas will always be the first window of the film industry and provide a good chance for real social interaction.

"Films cover public issues and sentiments, which are connected by public cinemas," Dai Jinhua, a professor who studies cinema at Peking University, told *ChinaReport*.

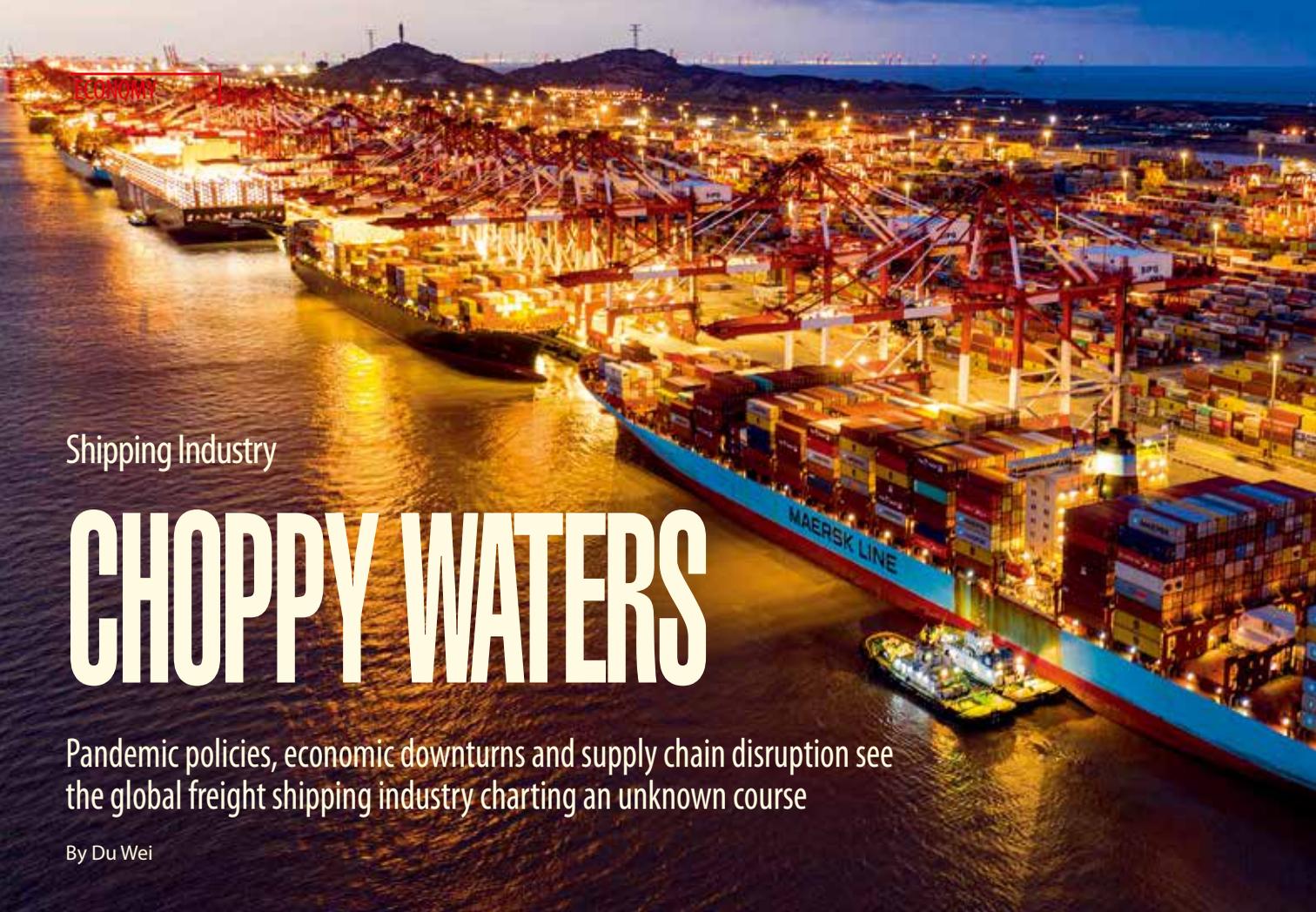
Despite the paltry box office numbers during the Labour Day holiday, analysts chalked it up as a success, considering cities like Beijing and Shanghai had closed all cinemas because of the pandemic. According to Maoyan, the top two films over Labour Day were new releases. Romance *Stay with Me* earned an 8.6/10 rating on the app, while US animated feature *The Bad Guys* received a 9.1. A cinema manager in Zhejiang Province surnamed Tao told *Caijing* magazine that there are excellent films waiting in the wings, postponed because of the pandemic.

Though the Palace is closed, Dong is still doing her part for the film industry. She posts regularly to followers on WeChat about films like *The Batman*. She said she remains confident that audiences will return. "As long as the pandemic is under control, audiences will be back as soon as there's a good film to see," she said. ★



A cinema employee sterilises seats, Bingo Cinema, Shengyang, Liaoning Province, March 25, 2020

PHOTO BY VCG



Shipping Industry

CHOPPY WATERS

Pandemic policies, economic downturns and supply chain disruption see the global freight shipping industry charting an unknown course

By Du Wei

Li Lu, a 37-year-old chief mate on a merchant cargo vessel, is still hesitating about whether he will return to sea on a regular crew change. The crew must rotate regularly as required by international maritime rules for health and safety. Li was supposed to replace other crew in March. He cannot afford to stay home for too long, as his job as a seafarer is the main source of income for his family. But like his colleagues, now he is finding the job he has done for 13 years “too risky to make a living from.”

In September 2020, Li departed from Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province as part of a crew of 22 seafarers, to the US and then Brazil, to transport grain to China. The journey kept him at sea for 11 months, the maximum under the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention which comes under the International Labour Organisation. After he finally arrived back in China, he had to spend 28

days in central quarantine, first in Shanghai, his port of entry, and then Zhengzhou, his hometown. When he actually got home, he had to do another seven days of self-monitoring.

The twists and turns he experienced in this long, arduous journey make him worry about when and how he can return home once he sets off again. Because of Covid-19 restrictions around the world, hundreds of thousands of seafarers are stuck at sea, unable to get replacements and go home. Meanwhile, others cannot go to sea to earn their living.

What’s worse, the health risks and restrictions are deterring seafarers. More and more are in the same position as Li, unwilling to go. Some are considering quitting altogether, even though it pays well.

“No one wants to replace them. And once these seafarers get rotated out and get home, they’ll hesitate like me,” Li said.

The crew-change crisis mirrors challenges faced by the global shipping industry since the pandemic started, including the demand-supply imbalance, strained transport capacity and uncertainties in sailing schedules. The pandemic is reshaping the shipping industry and supply chains around the world, including China, with its heavy reliance on sea transport for foreign trade.

Crew-change Crisis

Li works for a ship management company based in Shanghai as chief mate for a dry bulk carrier. His duties include cargo safety and supervising loading and unloading.

In late March 2021, when his vessel departed Brazil, it was already time for Li to have been rotated off, as they usually stay at sea for six months and then rest for three. But according to Covid regulations in Brazil, seafarers could not go ashore. They also could



Cargo carriers berth at Yangshan deep water port, Shanghai, October 23, 2021

PHOTO BY VCG

shipping line Tai Chong Cheang's branch in Shanghai, told *ChinaReport* that authorities at a Chinese port demanded that an 80,000-ton vessel apply seven days in advance for a crew change, so docking was delayed. Then the crew was required to do nucleic acid tests and unloading was not allowed before the test results came out. According to Lu, most Chinese ports have similar policies. Some require the ship to berth for at least 48 hours before replacing seafarers, even though cargo handling usually takes less than 24 hours, adding another day's delay. Other ports refuse to be the first point of entry, citing limits such as exceeding its maximum permissible draft. Fearing a single detected case could close an entire port, many refuse crew rotations too.

On April 12, the Ministry of Transport (MoT) reiterated that ports should not suspend crew changes for international vessels due to reasons such as lack of quarantine hotels or having departed from high-risk countries, unless the ports have already announced they would not allow crew rotations.

Crew Losses

The long quarantines for seafarers result in transport capacity loss and reduced turnover rates, which means sailors are in demand. Even though shipping is vital to China – 90 percent of its foreign trade goes by sea – the country lacks sailors. A report on Chinese seafarers released by China's MoT in 2021 shows that by the end of 2020, there were 269,995 certified sailors for international routes, a year-on-year growth of 4.1 percent. But in 2020, the 250 crew agencies licenced to recruit seafarers for overseas vessels assigned only 122,304 seafarers, a 21.3 percent decrease from the previous year. With crew rotation difficulties mounting, more Chinese seafarers are unwilling to go.

To cope, many Chinese lines are recruiting from other countries like the Philippines, the world's biggest source of seafarers. Lu Yongzhi told *ChinaReport* that his company has 10 dry bulk carriers, with seven previously crewed by Chinese and the rest with Filipino seamen. Starting from 2021, Chinese sailors crewed only half the ships.

not change crew in their next ports of call, including at Singapore and ports in China, Australia and Indonesia. They finally got replacements in Mauritius in August 2021. After quarantining for 21 days there, they got plane tickets at 10 times the usual price to Shanghai in early September. He finally returned home late that month.

Before the pandemic, the ship would dock every month on average and the crew would have shore leave. Eleven months at sea was a huge psychological challenge for the sailors.

In April 2020, Chinese authorities required more targeted pandemic measures for crew on international freight lines. In December 2021, the State Council demanded that all places facilitate reasonable crew-changes.

However, many places set obstacles or additional conditions to hinder crew-changes to avoid new Covid cases. Lu Yongzhi, general manager of leading Hong Kong

Crew replacement has become an international headache that still plagues global shipping. As the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) pointed out in its annual Review of Maritime Transport 2021, "responding to Covid-19, governments closed many borders and imposed lockdowns and prohibited people from disembarking, thus temporarily suspending crew changes."

Since September 2020, international organisations including the International Maritime Organisation and the UN have recommended actions to facilitate crew changes and designate seafarers as essential workers. But there is still no global consensus on unified measures.

In January 2021, the shipping industry released the Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change and put forward a Neptune Declaration Crew Change indicator that includes data from 90,000 seafarers with 10 leading ship managers. But the indicator launched in May 2021 showed a worsening situation for seafarers between June and July 2021 – more had been on board for over 11 months and more stayed on vessels beyond the expiry of their contract.

Paying the Price

When Li Lu and his fellow sailors changed shift in Mauritius, they spent a combined 1 million yuan (US\$150,000) between them to cover all kinds of expenses, including accommodation and plane tickets home. These expenses are passed to the shipowner, who further raises freight rates. Because of the shortage of hands, wages for merchant seafarers have soared. Before the pandemic, Li Lu earned US\$7,000 a month. Now he gets US\$10,000.

The global shipping market has fluctuated sharply since the pandemic. In the first three months following the pandemic's outbreak in January 2020, volume and freight rates dropped. Then major freight companies unanimously suspended part of their transport capacity. Rates rebounded in May 2020, and shipping demand has skyrocketed beyond supply ever since. Also, with loading and unloading less efficient, turnaround time



Seafarers clean the deck of their cargo ship en route from Tianjin to Quanzhou, southeastern Fujian Province, June 18, 2018

PHOTO BY VCG

of containers down, berth times up and port congestion severe, shipping prices continue to rise.

Xue Yingchun, captain of a shipping company based in Shanghai and vice president of Shanghai Hongqiao District's chamber of shipping, told *ChinaReport* that the highest freight rates for bulk carriers in 2021 were six times that in 2019. The surge in container freight rates is even greater. The rent for bulk carriers of 10,000 tons and above in 2021 was four times that in 2019. "For a bulk vessel of 20,000 tons, a day's delay in port means US\$20,000-30,000 more in charter costs. Berth fees also cost several thousands of yuan per day," Xue said.

Zhang Yongfeng analysed that the high container freight rates reflect the demand-supply imbalance since mid 2021, as consumption in the US and Europe has been robust. Now ports and wharfs in Europe and the US have resumed work, which has alleviated overseas port congestion and container shortages. In the long term, there is room to adjust for market expectations. Zhang said he was optimistic that the market will return to normal.

There are signs of stabilisation. On May 20, the Shanghai Shipping Exchange pub-

lished the latest China Containerised Freight Index, an indicator of the container freight rate, which stood at 3135.78, a big drop from the highest index of 3587.91 entering 2022. Between January and May 20, the Shanghai Containerised Freight Index dropped from 5109.60 to 4162.69, signaling that freight rates are going down.

Zhao Yifei, assistant dean of Sino-US Global Logistics Institute at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, told *ChinaReport* that in the latter half of 2021, when the Port of Los Angeles was at its most clogged, vessels queued for over 30 days. Now they only need to wait 10 days. Before the pandemic, vessels took around 20 days to travel from a Chinese port to North America. In January 2022 it took 40 days. As of April, it fell to 30 days. "The global carrier schedule performance index has restored to 30-40 percent of normal, a lot better than the worst time in October 2021 when it was only around 10 percent of the pre-pandemic level," Zhao said.

Domestic ports are also returning to normal. After a ship tracking app screenshot went viral online allegedly showing serious congestion of vessels waiting to berth at Shanghai in early April, Shanghai Port said that its efficiency has improved. Since March

28, the average wait time was less than 24 hours and on average less than 10 ships were queued.

On May 11, the MoT said that in April container throughput in Shanghai port restored to 82.4 percent of that in the same period of 2021 and continues to improve. The port, the world's largest in terms of container throughput, usually handles 2,000 ships and 40 million shipping containers annually. Average time in port has decreased to 2.12 days, Chinese media reported.

Uncertain Prospects

But challenges remain for the Port of Shanghai. About 75 percent of container cargo transported from Shanghai comes from other regions. But due to differences in Covid prevention policies across the country, including highway closures in cities and counties, many lorries were blocked from entering Shanghai, while truck drivers coming from Shanghai had to quarantine. Many ended up stuck on highways and were not allowed to exit their cabs. Zhao Yifei said both the port and shipping companies have pivoted to other solutions. Some freight shipping companies are docking at other mainland ports such as Ningbo, Zhoushan or Qingdao to improve loading efficiency. The situation in other ports is better, but difficulties in road logistics and container transport remain. The MoT said some containers are transported to and from Shanghai port by inland waterways now.

As Covid restrictions continue, mandatory quarantines for all links of the transportation process reduce loading efficiency. Some countries have special requirements for vessels from high-risk regions, requiring them to anchor for two weeks. Some Chinese ports require ships with Covid-19 cases to wait at anchorage until all the crew's nucleic acid tests are negative. The entire process could take nearly a month, meaning huge losses for shipowners and freight lines.

Zhang Yongfeng said unexpected factors might further aggravate the market, such as regional restrictions on delivery, changes in

CHINA BY NUMBERS

prevention policies, new Covid variants and the US mid-term elections later this year. But Zhao Yifei believes that although the pandemic will continue, the worst time for shipping has passed.

The UNCTAD review pointed out the global maritime industry is facing increasing uncertainties amid a slowing global economy. Over the past two decades, compound annual growth in maritime trade has been 2.9 percent, but over the period 2022-2026, UNCTAD expects that rate to slow to 2.4 percent.

In response to shortages, major shipping companies are mass-producing large or ultra-large container carriers. The China Association of the National Shipbuilding Industry revealed that major Chinese shipbuilders are already taking orders beyond 2024. Some market observers believe that as new container vessels are delivered in 2022, there will be oversupply in the market, which will gradually reduce freight rates, while others said the market's recovery depends on when the pandemic ends.

Regardless, Zhao Yifei said the industry is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic rates, as "the cost for ships, containers and seafarers all have changed by the pandemic and have reached a new balance" in the past two years.

As rising freight rates drive up imports and consumer prices, the UNCTAD review suggested that global import price levels will increase on average by 11 percent. The pandemic will change the overall structure and mode of supply chains, which will also affect the global shipping market. For example, enterprises may combine local sourcing and global sourcing. Hybrid operating models will appear, including just-in-time (material moved just before its use in the manufacturing process) and just-in-case supply chain models (where companies keep large inventories to minimise stocks being sold out). All this will "change distances and routes" of shipping services, the UNCTAD report said.

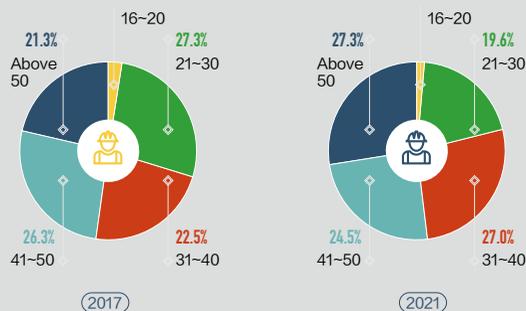
For Li Lu and his fellow seafarers, the voyage ahead will be no less hard to navigate than it has been since 2020. ★

0.3

Increase in the average age of China's migrant workers in 2021 that reached 41.7, with those aged above 50 the largest group

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

The proportion of migrant workers at different ages



-2.9%

Year-on-year change in the value-added of industrial enterprises above designated size (with annual revenue over US\$2.96 million) in April, a record low since March 2020

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Year-on-year change in the value-added of industrial enterprises above designated size



75.8%

China's industrial capacity utilisation rate in Q1 2022, a drop of 1.4 percentage points compared with Q1 2021

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China



23%

Year-on-year increase in the number of licenced patents from overseas applicants in China in 2021, totalling 110,000

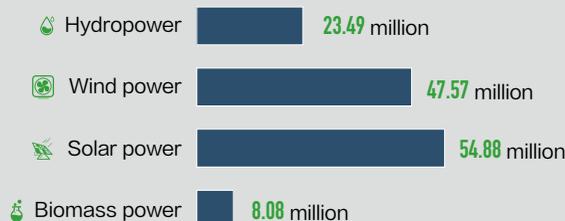
Source: State Administration for Market Regulation of China

44.8%

Share of renewable power capacity in total installed capacity by the end of 2021, totalling 1.06 billion kilowatts

Source: National Energy Administration of China

Renewable power capacity installed in 2021 (kilowatts)



Interview

Space for Collaboration

PHOTO BY XINHUA

Will China's space station, once construction is complete later this year, be a big step not only for human exploration of the universe but also a new space for international cooperation?

By Wan Shuyan

After a 183-day mission on board the Chinese Space Station (CSS) to test and verify core competencies of the station, three Chinese astronauts (also known as taikonauts), Zhai Zhigang, Wang Yaping and Ye Guangfu returned to Earth on April 16, 2022. Six spacecraft will be launched from May to October to complete in-orbit construction of the space station, according to a plan announced by the China Manned Space Agency. The first, Tianzhou-4 cargo spacecraft, was launched on May 10.

Peaceful exploration and utilisation of the universe and space resources have been a shared endeavour for humanity. Can they work together to realise this dream? *ChinaReport* spoke with Yang Yuguang, vice chair of the Space Transportation Committee of the International Astronautical Federation (IAF), and Giuseppe Reibaldi, president of the Moon Village Association (MVA), a Vienna-based NGO promoting international cooperation on moon exploration.

ChinaReport: How do you rate the three Chinese astronauts' performance in space?

Giuseppe Reibaldi: The astronauts' performance has been outstanding, taking advantage of the state-of-the-art Chinese Space

Station (CSS) modules. China's technology development is moving faster than in the West, since they have long-term plans that allow them to put in place all the required actions to achieve a specific goal.

The CSS is a state-of-the-art space station that has considered the experience of the International Space Station (ISS). We can see this from the time required to complete the station: For the ISS, it took tens of flights and more than 10 years; for the CSS, few flights and two to three years.

Of course, the size and complexity are different, but a compact space station is more economical and more effective than a larger one like the ISS. The ISS was designed in the 1990s, the CSS about 20 years later.

Yang Yuguang: The successful completion of the three astronauts' mission marks the successful conclusion to a phase of verification for key technologies of the CSS. The core task was to verify a long-duration stay in orbit, and whether they could work in as good shape as normal. During the Shenzhou-11 mission [in 2016], Chinese astronauts stayed in orbit for 33 days, while the Shenzhou-12 mission [in 2021] lasted three months. Now it's six months for the Shenzhou-13 mission. Six months will be the normal mission length

Chinese astronauts Zhai Zhigang (centre), Wang Yaping (right) and Ye Guangfu give their second talk to students from the Chinese Space Station, March 23

once the space station goes into operation. The three astronauts exercised in the space station and returned to Earth in good shape, full of energy.

Second, the mission validated the Environmental Control and Life Support System (ECLSS), a key technology essential to sustaining astronauts in space. Since astronauts stay in the space station for long periods of time, it is expensive to transport resupplies. The regenerative ECLSS makes resources renewable. Take water recycling, for example. By purifying sweat and urine into drinkable water, it can significantly reduce cargo spacecraft flights, and leave more room to transport experiment payloads.

In addition, the mission validated the latest crew transportation technology. It was the first time a Chinese manned spacecraft used a fast return mode, taking just over nine hours for the entire journey, compared with the one-day time span of the past. Behind the acceleration in speed is a set of sophisticated technologies and operations.

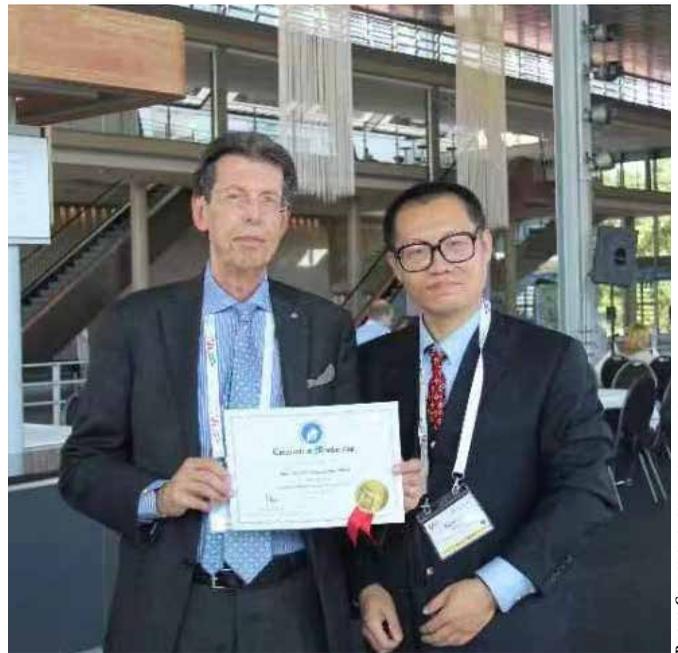
It also validated many core technologies. Shenzhou-13 completed fully autonomous radial rendezvous and docked with the Tianhe core module. For the first time, the CSS successfully re-positioned a cargo ship with its robotic arm. The mission also featured the first remote-controlled manual docking conducted by Chinese astronauts, which completed rendezvous and docking between the space station and the Tianzhou-2 cargo spaceship. The Shenzhou-13 crew completed two extravehicular activities. Wang Yaping became the first Chinese woman to do a spacewalk. The Shenzhou-12 and Shenzhou-13 crews conducted four extravehicular activities with two astronauts each time, which fully validated the second generation of China's extravehicular space suits.

The three astronauts also acted as "space teachers," giving two wonderful lectures to school students on Earth, as well as a space classroom session for students in the US. With huge potential for space cooperation between China and the US, the move will encourage more young people to join hands and explore the universe.

CR: The CSS has opened to the world since the very beginning of its construction, selecting nine experiments from 17 countries. What will international cooperation contribute to humanity's space exploration?

GR: Space exploration is hard, and international cooperation is the only realistic way to move forward in a sustainable manner. China has opened its space station to international cooperation since the beginning, and this is very positive. Many countries, as well as the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, are taking part in the CSS with their experiments. Some countries involved are space developing countries, and their participation is important for capacity building reasons.

The contribution of this cooperation is to offer access to the low gravity environment of the CSS to scientists from all over the world to better understand physical and biological phenomena, as this can improve life on Earth. International cooperation should bring better



Giuseppe Reibaldi, president of the Moon Village Association (MVA), takes a photo with Yang Yuguang (right), vice chair of the Space Transportation Committee of the International Astronautic Federation (IAF) and research fellow of the No. 2 Institute of the China Aerospace Science and Industry Company, for the MVA's accession to the IAF in 2018

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE INTERVIEWEE

understanding between countries for a peaceful life on Earth.

YY: In the future, the CSS will serve as a platform for scientific and technological cooperation that opens to the international community and benefits humanity. The CSS was equipped with international standard interfaces, which allow countries to conduct scientific experiments. The first nine international science experiments that have been selected are just the beginning; more and deeper international cooperation will be carried out on the CSS.

CR: Exploring the vast universe and peacefully using space resources are the common cause and dream for humanity, which transcend nationality, region and race. How should countries work together to achieve this?

GR: Cooperation between countries is increasing, since access to space technologies is becoming available to more countries than ever because of reduced costs. Trust to cooperate will become more important. For example, let's take the exploration and utilisation of the moon. The Moon Village concept allows all countries of the world to take part in this extraordinary endeavour for humanity with their own programmes, as long as they are open to cooperation. This is the reason we need to develop, within the UN system, lunar coordination mechanisms that will allow countries from all over the world to have a common level playing field on many topics like information sharing, space resources, space debris [and] inter-operability.

The European Space Agency has several cooperation [projects] with the China National Space Agency in the scientific field, and some

European astronauts have completed some preliminary training in China, with the goal of a future flight of European astronauts onboard the CSS. The future of cooperation in space will depend on the political landscape, but I hope that this will improve.

YY: Space exploration cannot go ahead without international cooperation. International cooperation can reduce costs and the threshold for decision-making and promote development of national space technology, which will benefit all of humanity. International cooperation in space will only increase in the future, with a deeper level and a more extensive scope.

China's space sector has long taken part in international cooperation, with the launch of the China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite 01 in the late 20th century. Chinese spacecraft Chang'e-4 carried scientific payloads [to the moon in 2019] from Germany, Sweden, Netherlands and Saudi Arabia. In the meantime, China has long-standing cooperative relationships with Europe and Russia. Chinese astronauts have trained in Moscow before, while China and Europe have also had astronaut training exchanges. China also jointly launched the Zhangheng-1 experimental seismo-electromagnetic satellite in cooperation with Italy, as well as an oceanographic satellite in collaboration with France.

China's manned space sector can carry four levels of international cooperation. The first is joint experiments, which are currently the most frequently seen form of cooperation. An example is the Shenzhou-8 spacecraft, which carried a device for China and Germany's joint life-science experiments; second is visits by foreign astronauts; third is the visit of a foreign spacecraft to the CSS and the fourth is docking foreign modules to be part of the CSS. The Tiangong Space Station is extendable, so more modules can dock, and it can extend beyond the space station's current T-shaped structure.

CR: As the Russia-Ukraine conflict fuels tensions between the US and Russia, will ISS operations extend to 2030? What role will the ISS and the CSS play in the future?

GR: The ISS and CSS could cooperate, in the short term, by conducting parallel scientific experiments to gather more data. The main issue with microgravity research is low statistics results. Running parallel experiments on the same topic would increase statistics and provide more reliable results.

The possibility to exchange crew between the two stations is there, even if it's complex because of different orbits. The main obstacle is political will. I hope that before the ISS is decommissioned by 2030, there may be the possibility of a crew exchange. After 2030, there will be private space stations and the possibility of exchanging astronauts for safety reasons needs to be addressed as soon as possible, just as for ships at sea.

YY: The US and Russia previously tried to extend the life of the ISS until 2030. But as the Russia-Ukraine conflict continues, the US

and Russia have hinted at a possible "separation" at the ISS. But such a move is practically difficult: Though the ISS was built by 16 countries, the US and Russia hosted the most modules. Russia's modules are well-equipped and can remain operational after separation. But as the US modules rely on Russia's propulsion system, if such a situation happens, the US needs propulsion capability soon to avoid de-orbiting.

Even after the retirement of the ISS, others will emerge. In the US and other leading spacefaring countries, commercial space is experiencing rapid development, with mature technology in low-Earth orbit space stations. Commercial space companies, such as Nanoracks and Axiom, are able to create commercial space stations for space tourism.

CR: What can be done to explore a deep and extensive model for international space cooperation?

GR: Space travel has been a dream for humanity since the dawn of humankind. By looking to the stars, there is an opportunity to tap the skills of many people around the world. But they need to know that space exploration is happening now and everyone can take part. Space agencies and non-governmental organisations around the world have a moral obligation to implement important outreach activities.

As for the high-level cooperation model, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Every project will have a specific way to cooperate, but in this the UN is and will be central to involving as many countries as possible.

YY: At present, the major leading countries in space exploration have established a relatively mature mechanism for cooperation and consultation, including bilateral and multilateral exchange and cooperation mechanisms. The road to international cooperation will be wider in the future. As for countries that are less involved in space exploration or without a complete space industry, how can they take part in global cooperation?

These countries can launch spacecraft with countries leading the world's space exploration and participate in space science experiments as well. In this way, they could also benefit from space exploration, which pushes forward the effort to build a community of a shared future for humankind in outer space exploration.

Countries around the world, especially leaders on space exploration, should ward off political interference, and strengthen communication and understanding. In this way, they can consolidate mutual trust, which is the foundation of cooperation. Countries should strengthen bilateral and multilateral exchange mechanisms, organise more international conferences for astronautical exchanges and foster more cooperation in the commercial space sector. ★

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Ancient Bronzeware

Pictured is the He Zun on display at The Making of Zhongguo exhibition, Palace Museum, Beijing, February 14

PHOTO BY VCG

IN THE NAME OF CHINA

A vessel from the Western Zhou Dynasty is the oldest known bronzeware with an inscription that includes the characters for China

By Song Yimin and Du Guodong

China's Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City, recently held a cultural relics exhibition titled "The Making of Zhongguo – Origins, Developments and Achievements of Chinese Civilisation," which brought together more than 130 national treasures from 30 museums nationwide. The artefacts on display, including bronzeware, ceramics, jades and paintings, span from the Neolithic Age to the

Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

In 2017, China Central Television and several museums across the country came together to produce a documentary series called *The Nation's Greatest Treasures*, which was broadcast for three seasons and was incredibly popular. The exhibition is a presentation of major national treasures featured on the programme.

Many people wonder why the exhibition is called "The Making of Zhongguo." The exhibi-

tion is aimed at explaining where Chinese civilisation and culture came from through more than 100 antiques and when the name China – or Zhongguo, literally meaning Middle Kingdom – came into being. The keys to these questions are connected to one of the antiquities on display, which is also the most eye-catching and prominent example of bronzeware from the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BCE) – a vessel called the He Zun.

“He” is the name of the maker and *zun* refers to wine vessels used in ancient China. It has 12 rows of 122 inscribed Chinese characters at the base, and the expression *Zhongguo*, meaning the hinterland of China, was used in an inscription – the first known use of the characters so far discovered in Chinese history. This is evidence that people were already referring to certain territory within the country as “China” more than 3,000 years ago, although the meaning and use of the word have greatly expanded since then.

Modest Discovery

In 1963, a farmer in the city of Baoji, Shaanxi Province, discovered the vessel at a cliff near his home on a rainy evening. The artifact, about one cubic metre in volume, was sticking out of the soil. Unaware of its value and importance, the farmer used it for storing food. Because the vessel was too heavy to carry, he left it to another farmer when he moved away. Two years later, the new owner sold it to a waste recycling station after encountering financial difficulties.

The vessel was later spotted by an em-

ployee at the Baoji Bronzeware Museum, who brought it for 30 yuan (US\$4.5) when the average monthly salary of an urban worker was 36 yuan (US\$5.4). Back then, salvage was an important channel to collect cultural relics in China, and many antiques were found in waste collection stations.

Although safe at the museum, the He Zun was considered an ordinary antique, because Baoji, 175 kilometres west of Xi’an, is an area where antique bronzes are often unearthed. While magnificent, it did not particularly stand out among the bronze artifacts of the same period.

The He Zun stands 38.8 centimetres tall, 28.8 centimetres in diameter and weighs 14.6 kilograms. The piece has a three-dimensional *taotie* design – an ancient Chinese mythological creature that manifests dignity and majesty. The *taotie* motif often appears on bronze artifacts of the time, and is a type of zoomorphic mask, although scholars disagree with what it actually represented to the people of the time.

In 1975, the He Zun was to be exhibited

abroad, and experts had to appraise it. Ma Chengyuan, an expert on bronze and former curator of the Shanghai Museum, removed the rust and revealed the 122-character inscription on its base.

It told the story of a dynastic transfer of power: He’s father followed King Wen and King Wu of the Western Zhou Dynasty to conquer the Shang Dynasty. King Cheng, the son of King Wu, succeeded the throne and established a new capital at Luoyi, naming it Chengzhou. The new king held a grand ceremony to worship heaven and the late kings, and summoned He to commemorate the achievements of his ancestors. King Cheng gave He 30 strings of cowrie shells as his reward.

He had made a *zun* to remember the glorious achievements of the ancestors. After the discovery of the 122-word inscription, the He Zun turned from an ordinary bronzeware from the Western Zhou Dynasty to a national treasure overnight. Whether a bronze has inscriptions can determine its value, both monetary and historical. The more words in the inscription, the more significant the artifact. It is, though, highly unusual to find a bronze with 122 words dating back to more than 3,000 years ago.

In 1976, the He Zun was valued at US\$30 million for insurance purposes. In 1982, the He Zun featured on a set of special issue stamps featuring antiques and became known worldwide. The National Cultural Heritage Administration listed it as one of the 64 designated artifacts that can never leave Chinese soil in January 2002. The flame cauldron of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022 also took the shape of the He Zun.

Significance

Unlike the landscape of today’s China, *Zhongguo* in the inscriptions referred to a city – Chengzhou, which is where today’s Luoyang, Central China’s Henan Province sits. After King Wu conquered the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE), he considered establishing a new capital in order to better manage the Shang so it would be convenient for all states under his rule to pay tribute.

A capital should be close to the states it controls. The territory ruled to a greater or lesser



PHOTO BY YCG

The He Zun bronze vessel and its inscription of 122 characters, quite unprecedented for its size. The He Zun dates from 1038 BCE in the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BCE)

degree by the Western Zhou stretched from Liaoning Province in the north, Gansu Province in the west, Shandong Province in the east and the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the south. This meant that vassal states, even if not under direct control, would have no excuse not to pay their tribute because of a long journey. In ancient China, it was tantamount to a rebellion if dukes or princes refused to offer tributes. The capital was named Zhongguo, or the Middle Kingdom. To this day, Zhongguo still means “the central area of the world” and the city of Luoyang is broadly located in Central China.

After King Wu conquered the Shang Dynasty, he intended to move his capital, but died before he could do so. His son, King Cheng, was still young when he ascended the throne. Duke Zhou, King Wu’s younger brother and uncle of King Cheng, assisted with the administration.

According to Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* (ca.145-86 BCE), King Wu was intending to build the new capital but he did not know whether the relocation was made.

The discovery of the inscriptions on the bottom of the He Zun confirmed that King Cheng did indeed move his capital. There is a sentence which translated literally reads “dwell in this central territory and from here govern the people.” It clearly shows the reasons for moving to the new capital.

The He Zun’s inscriptions also clearly explain



Pictured is the site where the He Zun was excavated, Jiacun Ruins, Baoji, Shaanxi Province

PHOTO BY SILK ROAD NETWORK

the specific location of the capital Chengzhou and how the Zhou kings conquered the Shang. More importantly, it specified the exact date – April 23 during the fifth year of King Cheng’s reign.

In 1996, China started the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project, a multi-disciplinary programme to provide a scientifically based chronology of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou, the three earliest dynasties in Chinese history. In 2004, the Chinese Civilisation Exploration Project was launched to study the origins of Chinese history and ancient culture through a multidisciplinary perspective.

The research team, led by Li Xueqin, the famed late historian, archaeologist, and paleog-

rapher, and composed of experts from the fields of astronomy, geography, archaeology and biology, concluded that King Wu conquered the Shang Dynasty in 1046 BCE. The finding was widely accepted among historians both in China and abroad. The result infers that the fifth year of King Cheng’s rule, the year when the He Zun was produced, was 1038 BCE.

Today, when you look at this invaluable treasure and carefully read the words on the inscription rubbings, you can feel the palpable depth of Chinese history and culture. We still can read it clearly 3,000 years later and experience the historical passing of time for which King Cheng awarded He his 30 strings of cowrie shells. ★



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Beijing

Capital's Hidden Assets

A trip off Beijing's beaten track rewards the visitor with quirky sites away from mainstream tourist trails

By Julie Wolf

Beijing is a name that conjures visions of ancient world wonders, imperial palaces, and modern power. Few places in the world have such a long, varied, and complicated history and it is no wonder that this is one of the first places travellers explore when they get to China. They go to the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and watch the flag ceremony in Tiananmen square and think, 'I have done it! I have seen Beijing!' The more adventurous tourist might venture into the hutongs scouring shops for souvenirs and sipping tea or coffee in old alleys. All of those things are amazing and I strongly encourage you to go and experience them when you are here. But I have called this city home for over three years now and as with most tourist locations I can tell you, you are barely scratching the surface of what this place has to offer. Here are three of my favourite off-the-beaten-path locations for a truly memorable Beijing holiday.

Let's start with when to go. Spring. Beijing in springtime is a magical technicolour dream that rivals Dorothy stepping into

Oz for the first time. Flowers bloom everywhere and the air is constantly scented with roses, cherry blossoms, and peonies (yes, some of them have a smell.) And Beijing has hundreds of public parks and gardens to take full advantage of the scenery. But my favourite is Jingshan Park. Like many of the gardens in Beijing, this was once an imperial pleasure garden that has since been renovated and opened to the public. This one has two things that make it particularly special. The first is that it is home to the most varieties of peonies in China, and some claim the world. That is because traditionally peonies were a sign of wealth and power and were often used to represent the royal family because the bushes could take generations to bloom but once established could survive the harsh Beijing winter and bloom majestically in perpetuity. And they are majestic.

This particular garden has anywhere from 500 to over 1,000 varieties depending on who you ask and while I have never counted them, I can tell you they are in fact breathtaking against the backdrop of blooming

trees and ancient temples housed inside the park walls. Walk along the paths and you are sure to catch artists sketching and painting, dance troops and musicians practicing, and children running thru the blooms as parents snap memories with their cameras. It makes for an idyllic and unique Sunday stroll.

The second thing that makes this park unlike any other is its incredible views. It is located opposite the north gate of the Forbidden City and inside the park, you can climb up to Wanchun Pavilion. From there look north and you will have a panoramic view of all of Beijing stretching to the mountains, look south and you have a bird's-eye view down into the imperial complex that is not to be missed. Park entrance is only 5 yuan (US\$0.8) and you do not need a guide to get the most out of this experience.

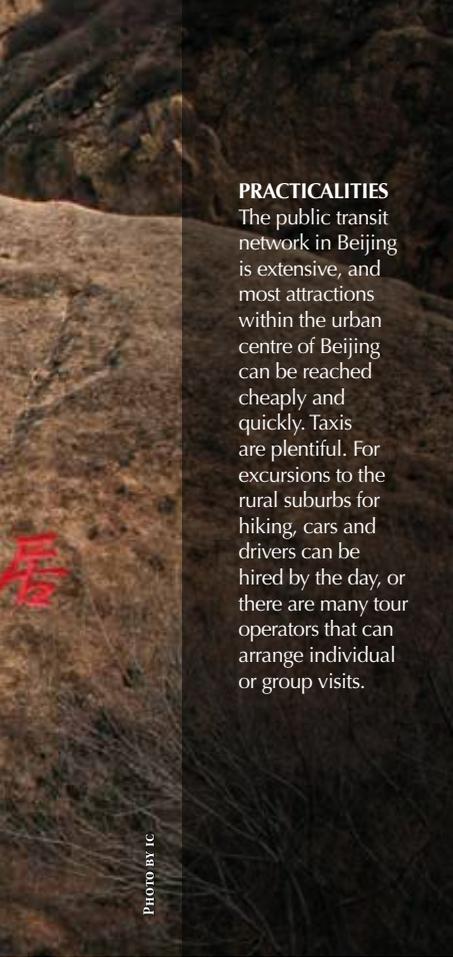
Antiquing Fantasies

The next stop on the hidden Beijing trail for me is the massive maze of streets on the central east side of Beijing near the

PRACTICALITIES

The public transit network in Beijing is extensive, and most attractions within the urban centre of Beijing can be reached cheaply and quickly. Taxis are plentiful. For excursions to the rural suburbs for hiking, cars and drivers can be hired by the day, or there are many tour operators that can arrange individual or group visits.

PHOTO BY IC



Guyaju Cliff Dwellings, Yanqing District, Beijing

4th Ring Road. They make up the antique market called Gaobeidian. Think of China's version of Portobello Road in London but much older and much larger. This network of old shops looks unassuming and a little run down. But pick a shop, any shop, and step inside for the fulfillment of all your antiquing fantasies. I can easily spend hours treasure hunting in the dusty backrooms and workshops where you will find everything from giant drums and old rickshaws to modern art and reclaimed wood carvings from demolished buildings. Pottery and old baskets as well as painted cabinets and screens are everywhere. Prices are not be as cheap as some of the other markets aimed at tourists but you are also more likely to stumble across a truly unique treasure with fewer mass-produced pieces. No cost of entry but be prepared to haggle hard. Some shop owners have pretty good English skills but I strongly recommend having your translation app of choice on hand to help with price negotiations. If you ask they can generally arrange shipment anywhere in the world at an



PHOTO BY CNS

Peonies in Jingshan Park, downtown Beijing



additional fee.

Cliff Mysteries

Finally, allow a day for a short excursion about two hours northwest of Beijing city centre to hike a UNESCO world heritage site. The Guyaju Cliff Dwellings is one of history's most recent mysteries. These elaborate cave dwellings carved into the rock were found in 1984 during an excavation of the area and there is still no clues as to who made them or why. No artifacts were found, and no pottery, weapons, or any evidence of habitation except the structures themselves. Many are multi-room homes with obvious bed chambers, areas where cooking fires were made, and ladders carved into the stone to allow travel between levels. In short, it is the coolest clubhouse you could have imagined

as a kid with an added Scooby-Doo mystery. The hike to get there is not too challenging and healthy kids from age 8 and up could probably make the trek with no problem. If you have adventurous kids, I strongly encourage this day trip and if you are an adult I promise a stunning view that will get your blood pumping and your imagination racing. As of 2022, there is no fee to enter this park but you will need a car and driver to get there. While you can rent a car and drive yourself, I suggest paying to take a tour with a guide, particularly if your language skills are not strong as this is outside of Beijing and most people will only speak Chinese. I took the tour with a company called China Travelers for 420 yuan (US\$60) and it included round-trip transportation, water during the hike, an excellent English-speaking guide, and lunch at a local farmhouse where we had as much farm-to-table local food as we could consume.

Like most cities, Beijing has a myriad of unknown adventures and hidden gems waiting for travellers and locals to discover. ★

Baby Culture Wars

By Chris Hawke

A common trope in Chinese television is the plight of a new bride who moves in with her husband's parents and is bullied mercilessly.

I think this trope is tired and sexist – but not for the reasons you might think.

I ask you this: What happens when a daughter's parents move in with their foreign son-in-law to help with a newborn child?

The answer, I can tell you from first-hand experience – is a culture clash.

In our household, this took place over several baby battlefronts. The first was breast feeding.

In North America, there is a soul-crushing and monolithic pressure for mothers to breastfeed.

On the other hand, in China it is normal to either supplement breast milk with baby formula or opt to use baby formula exclusively.

This was a recipe for high tension when my wife and I came home with our first baby.

You'd think something so natural would be easy, but for many people it is not. The big trick is that there is naturally a period when the mother's milk is still coming in during which the baby will be hungry and lose weight.

This was considered normal by our Canadian midwife, but child abuse by my in-laws.

My wife and I, under the guidance of our midwife, tried to navigate down the tricky road of breastfeeding.

Our daughter was obviously hungry, but milk was not yet flowing bountifully.

Her parents could not understand why we did not immediately use formula.

My wife's kindly father took me to lunch and patiently explained that raising a baby is simple. "If she is hungry, you need to feed her."

Later, my wife, increasingly frustrated with what she perceived as the slow rate of her breastmilk coming in, said, "My friend gave her baby formula while she started breastfeeding, and it worked out great. It's three months later and the baby is still drinking formula."

With the aid of a breast pump and yes, some formula, we made it through the first 10 days and our baby is plump and happy, exclusively

My in-laws and wife are deathly afraid of our baby getting cold or being exposed to wind. This will apparently lead to horrible, unspecified consequences, which are so obvious my wife and in-laws won't list them



ILLUSTRATION BY XIAO ZHENDUO

drinking breastmilk.

The second battlefront has been a war of anxieties about the biggest threat to the baby's health – wind and cold, or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

My in-laws and wife are deathly afraid of our baby getting cold or being exposed to wind. This will apparently lead to horrible, unspecified consequences, which are so obvious my wife and in-laws won't list them.

As a result, the lining of the baby's crib, bassinet and baby carriage is lined with thick quilts,

and the baby is wrapped in multiple layers and blankets, even when adults outside are wearing t-shirts.

I, on the other hand, am preternaturally worried about SIDS, also known by the terrifying moniker "crib death." Although this rarely occurs, it happens often enough that our crib and carriage have giant warning labels stating in large letters: "Risk of suffocation, do not place a comforter or quilt under a sleeping baby."

Although I pointed this out a number of times, compliance only lasts for a few days, until a thin blanket is placed on the crib, and then thicker blanket, and finally a quilt. I remove them, and the dance starts again.

The final battlefront in the baby wars has been taking the child outside for a stroll in her carriage. I was physically blocked from doing this the first time I tried it. It turns out that to some Chinese people, taking a child outside for a stroll within the first 30 or even 100 days of its life is akin to killing it.

I pointed out that our foreign midwife and foreign doctor both said it would be beneficial to the child's health to go outside.

This was countered by the point that you could ask 100 Chinese doctors and 100 Chinese midwives the same question, and they would absolutely bar the child from going outside in cold or windy weather, or during the first month of life.

Fortunately, spring came before this conflict became too overheated. Putting a quilt in the crib and carriage no longer seemed as important, and anyways, the baby refuses to sleep anywhere but on her mother or father's chest.

Outdoors is no longer windy or cold, so going outside has stopped being a flashpoint. And the baby, engorged with mother's milk, has become fat, cheerful and auspicious.

It turns out there can only be one king in any castle, and for the time being, it is not me. However, putting my pride aside and acquiescing to some strange habits is a small price to pay for all the love, extra help and extra hours of sleep we get from having the help of our in-laws. ★

Puff or Pass?

By Leila Hashemi

First of all, I want to say I don't condone or want to make smoking seem glamorous in any way, but there is an undeniable trend in China that has taken the country by storm – e-cigarettes. When I first came to China, I was a cigarette smoker. While I didn't smoke every day, I did smoke when I was drinking, so pretty much every weekend.

After waking up with not only a headache from too many libations, my throat was sore, my hair and clothes smelled like cigarettes and I just felt gross. One day, I decided I would give vaping a try. Now, back home the big vapes had been out for years and you would see those who were into it blowing huge clouds of smoke and fiddling with the device that you had to add oil to and change filters on, but the vapes that first starting showing signs of popularity here were the disposable one-time-use e-cigs.

My friend and I decided to quit smoking regular cigarettes together, so we were always on the lookout for these vapes, which could be found in most convenience stores. One of the craziest brandings I saw was "Stop Your Heart." This vape was packing 15 percent nicotine whereas most others range between 2 and 5 percent. Let's just say I decided against trying that one out.

Soon I realised I had a disposable e-cig graveyard starting in my room and that's when I saw an ad on my WeChat moments advertising vapes with replaceable pods and a whole range of flavours such as mung bean, mango, grape, cola, ice cream and even tomato (yes, I tried it; yes, it was terrible). I added the seller and soon I had my very own reusable vape in my favourite colour, purple.

I was extremely happy about my habit change – no more smelly clothes and sore throats, and best of all I stopped smoking regular cigarettes all together. But in November 2019 things looked bleak when China put a ban on selling and advertising electronic cigarettes online in an effort to keep children from buying and using the products.

What were we gonna do? Well, seems that

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ILLUSTRATION BY XIAO ZHENDUO

someone who had that same question decided to monopolise on this idea and brick and mortar e-cig shops are now quite literally on every corner. RELX, a popular e-cig company, holds 60 percent of the market and has 1,400 shops across the country. When I am out with friends, we all have the same vapes in varying colours and generations, but they are all from RELX. Even our local bar has stock there to sell to the customers. It seemed

the worry was gone and now vape lovers had even more flavours and convenience to get their pod refills anytime and anywhere. We were on easy street now.

However, good things don't always last. On March 11 of this year, China's legislators released a final version of regulation measures for e-cigs that would ban the sale of flavoured vape pods other than tobacco to take effect on May 1, 2022. Pretty much everyone I know went into a buying frenzy. I immediately went to my local shop and bought 10 boxes of pods; each box has three pods and costs 99 yuan (US\$15). Some of my friends said their local contacts for pods were upping the price by double.

I even felt like I didn't want to share my contact with friends in fear that I might miss out of what I needed to stock up on before the flavour purge. In the end, I purchased almost 20 boxes. Some of my friends bought even more. At the local bar that sells the pods, everyone crowded around trying to grab a few boxes of their favourite flavours in last ditch efforts to secure a stock for themselves. I started to wonder what I would do when I ran out – would I quit smoking all together or go back to traditional cigarettes, which I definitely don't want to do.

Luckily, right before the May 1 cut off, the date was extended to October 1, 2022. Still, while time is being bought, and surely more pods as well, this will change the vaping culture. While I agree that measures should be taken to keep children from smoking, I don't think that this is the only way and I fear that it will lead to a surge of people going back to traditional cigarettes. I do believe the best choice is not to smoke at all, but would much rather be taking a few drags from my mango flavoured, purple vape than smoking tobacco cigarettes any day. However, it's not as bad as it could be for us vapers here in China, in countries such as Thailand just owning a vape can get you jail time or fines. Guess us vapers will have to eventually decide if we will continue to puff or pass. ★

Cooking with Relevant Organs

By Mina Yan

Before we even jump into any specific type of Chinese cuisine, let's start with the ingredients. In the US we eat a lot of meat, but stick to the primary cuts: steaks, chicken breasts, pork belly, etc. Even with fish, we eat boneless fillets. But not in China.

Actually, in most parts of the world, it's completely normal to eat every part of the animal. Take chicken, for example. Americans prefer white meat, while Chinese cuisine prefers darker meats – and feet. With Chinese cooking methods, chicken feet soak up broths and sauces. It's no wonder they're a favourite snack across the country. Back in 2008, demand was so great that the US exported nearly US\$700 million in chicken feet to China. That's a lot of scratch for cuts that otherwise don't make the cut in the US.

The history of cooking all parts of an animal originates from cultures that aren't used to industrial farming and excess.

In the past, animals would only be slaughtered on major holidays or to honour a special guest. Meat was scarce, and

if a chicken was going to get slaughtered, you bet every piece of the animal was going to be cooked. That zero-waste mentality produced some delicious offal recipes that remain popular today.

Today, if you get some beers with a local, chances are they're ordering duck neck, duck head, tongue, chicken feet, or chicken wing tips.

These smaller, less frequently eaten parts of the animal soak up the sauces they're cooked in and turn into seriously infused nibbles unlike their much thicker breast and thigh cuts. Even their organs are turned into delicious snacks.

In the US, barbecue involves large racks of meat. But in China, they're skewers of diced cuts. One of the all-time favourites is chicken heart. When I first moved to China, I would always buy them for my dog because they're high in iron. But man, I can't believe how long it took me to try barbecued chicken heart and fall in love. Chicken hearts have a creamy and smooth texture with just a slight hint of iron. The



meat is so flavourful that grilling it with a dash of salt is enough.

It's actually way healthier to eat skewers of barbecued hearts than it is to eat wings. Hearts are rich in CoQ10, a vitamin that's proven to be 10 times more potent than vitamin E, making it among the most powerful antioxidants out there. Hearts are also high in selenium, iron and zinc, which helps with the body's hormone production.

If the zero-waste, taste, or even health aspects aren't enough to get you eating offal, how about skin care?

One dish that locals (especially women) swear by is collagen-rich pork trotters. While many nutritionists claim that very little collagen can be absorbed this way, the saying "Asian don't raisin" was enough to get me eating trotters. A super delicious pork snack that's a tiny fraction of the cost of botox? Yes, please! ★

real chinese

shangtou

smitten/tipsy

shàng

tóu



When Taiwanese fitness guru Liu Genghong's livestreams went viral in April, no one was exactly sure why. But many of his die-hard fans say they are *shangtou* (meaning "smitten") by the upbeat soundtrack from pop megastar Jay Chou and Liu's constant encouragement to not let up.

Originally meaning "tipsy," gamers used *shangtou* to describe how players get caught up in campaigns or battles that are not

worth continuing. The term then took off online to describe really getting into something. For example, binge-watching a TV series is a *shangtou* experience, as is looping a new favourite song.

The word also has an antonym, *xiatou*, to describe when you're turned off to something, most often for a particular reason. For example, a disappointing season finale could be *xiatou*, ruining the entire TV series for you ★



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