

OPINION: NAVIGATING THE STRAIT P.24 | FEATURES: GROWING OLD, STAYING STRONG P.38

BEIJING REVIEW

VOL.69 NO.15 APRIL 9, 2026

北京周報 WWW.BJREVIEW.COM

THE SHOW GOES ON

China's theater boom is about more than applause



RMB9.00
USD1.70
AUD3.00
GBP1.20
CAD2.60
CHF2.60
JPY133

ISSN 1000-9140



9 771000 914260

邮发代号2-922 · 国内统一连续出版物号: CN11-1576/G2

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Cover Photo: Dance drama *A Dream of Red Mansions* is staged at the Hong Kong Cultural Center Grand Theater in August 2025 (VCG)

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北京商報

BEIJING REVIEW

A News Weekly Magazine
Published Since 1958

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E-mail: circulation@cicgamericas.com

Published every Thursday by
CICG Center for Americas, 24 Baiwanzhuang Lu,
Beijing 100037, China

Overseas Distributor: China International Book Trading
Corporation, P. O. BOX 399,

Beijing 100048, China
Tel: 86-10-68413849, 1-416-497-8096 (Canada)
Fax: 86-10-68412166

E-mail: fp@mail.cibtc.com.cn

Website: <http://www.cibtc.com>

General Distributor for Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan:

Peace Book Co. Ltd.
17/F, Paramount Bldg, 12 Ka Yip St, Chai Wan, HK
Tel: 852-28046687 **Fax:** 852-28046409

Beijing Review (ISSN 1000-9140 USPS 2812) is published weekly in the United States for US\$64.00 per year by Cypress Books, 360 Swift Avenue, Suite 48, South San Francisco, CA 94080
News Postage Paid at Burlingame, CA 94010-9997
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Beijing Review*, Cypress Books, 360 Swift Avenue, Suite 48, South San Francisco, CA 94080

Beyond the Encore

Interest in attending the theater has been growing around the country in recent years, with theaters staging performances that target a wider range of cultural consumers.

A decade ago, China's musical productions were dominated by Western classics such as *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, but today, domestic originals have become just as popular as their imported counterparts, particularly those that embody traditional Chinese culture. Original musical *Jinyiwei: The Blade and the Flower* has attracted large young audiences with its distinctive martial arts aesthetics and suspenseful narrative. *The New Story of Woodman Liu Hai* reinterprets a classic story in a modern style, lending a new sense of vitality to the traditional folk tale in contemporary theater. Fans find it hard to secure tickets for *A Tapestry of a Legendary Land*, a musical inspired by a renowned ancient painting.

Theaters outside China are also incorporating traditional Chinese culture into modern productions. In the United Kingdom, the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham has adapted *The Peony Pavilion* by Chinese dramatist Tang Xianzu (1550-1616) into a play in William Shakespeare's poetic style. Productions like this one

don't simply translate Eastern stories for Western audiences, but rather allow two great theatrical traditions to engage in dialogue at the creative level.

China's increased interest in theater is creating economic benefits for adjacent industries, including hospitality and tourism. One estimate suggests every yuan spent on theater tickets generates 6.85 yuan (\$1) in related consumption, as theatergoers tend to build larger experiences around seeing performances. Beijing's Capital Theater draws audiences to dine and shop at the nearby Wangfujing commercial district. The Wuzhen Theater Festival, which has been running for 12 years, brings millions of visitors to the town of Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province, each year.

The popularity of theater stems from the upgrading of people's cultural consumption demands, brought about by China's economic and social development. The country's theaters are playing a growing role in connecting tradition and modernity, local and global artistic traditions as well as art and life. Stage lights are illuminating not only backdrops, actors and props, but also China's growing confidence in its culture and increased desire to connect to it. **BR**



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JAPAN.....JPY188 EUROPE.....EUR1.90
TÜRKIYE.....TRY5.00 HK.....HKD9.30 NEPAL.....RS40

主管单位：中国外文出版发行事业局

主办单位：中国外文局美洲传播中心（北京周报社）

出版单位：中国外文局美洲传播中心（北京周报社）

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印刷：北京华联印刷有限公司

北京周报 英文版2026年 第15期 ISSN 1000-9140

国内统一连续出版物号：CN11-1576/G2 邮发代号：2-922

广告许可证0171号 北京市期刊登记证第733号

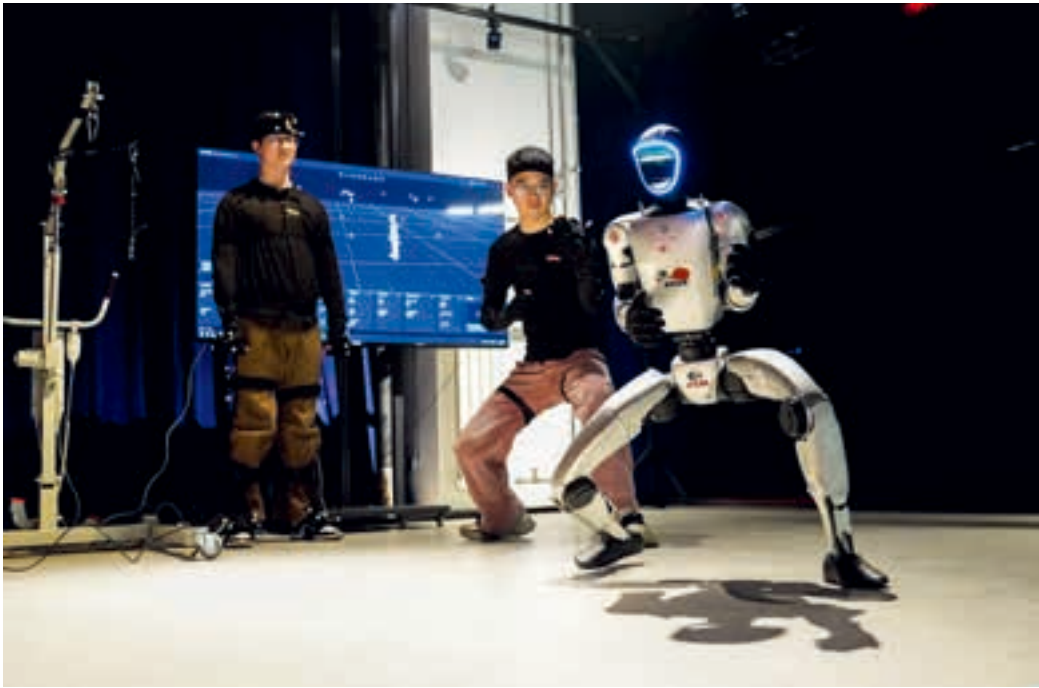
国内零售价：人民币9.00元



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HONORING A HEROINE

Locals gather in Sanbao Dong Village in Rongjiang County, Guizhou Province, to celebrate the Sama Festival on March 28. Sama was a heroine from the ancient matriarchal society of the Dong people. The festival, designated as national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, is held to honor their ancestor. The Dong ethnic group has a population of 3.49 million, primarily concentrated in the provinces of Guizhou, Hunan and Hubei, as well as Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.



Mirror, Mirror

A staff member of Noitom Technology Co. Ltd. demonstrates a robot controlled through motion capture technology during the International Sci-Fi and Future Tech Expo Beijing 2026 on March 26.

Medical Insurance Fraud

On April 1, China implemented a set of guidelines to strengthen the crackdown on fraud in the country's universal basic medical insurance.

The guidelines were released earlier this year by China's National Healthcare Security Administration, which stated that they will provide detailed provisions on the utilization, supervision and management of the basic medical insurance fund.

According to the guidelines, designated institutions—including hospitals, clinics and pharmacies—under the basic medical insurance framework may be regarded as having committed medical insurance fraud

if they induce people to seek medical treatment or purchase drugs under false identities through persuasion, false advertising, improper fee waivers, or offering additional money.

Individuals can also be penalized for fraud if they knowingly participate in activities involving the fraudulent use of the medical insurance fund.

The guidelines also say that reselling drugs, medical consumables or medical service items that have already been paid for by the basic medical insurance fund can be considered illegal resale.

Funeral Service Pricing

Chinese authorities have rolled out a new regulation mandating clear price labeling across the

funeral service industry, aiming to eradicate the opaque pricing and excessive charges that have long plagued this sector.

The regulation, released on March 31 by the State Administration for Market Regulation and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, outlines both general requirements applicable to all funeral sector operators, as well as special provisions tailored to specific types of businesses.

Under the regulation, operators must clearly label price information for funeral goods and services. They are also required to publicly display service supervision and complaint hotlines, adopt standardized contracts for funeral services and implement online price disclosure.

The new rule will take effect on May 31 on a trial basis.

Improving Ecology

The Qinling Mountains have seen gradual improvements in ecological quality, with steady expansion of forest and wetland coverage, according to an official report released on March 30.

The blue book published by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) said more than 50 percent of key ecological zones are showing signs of recovery, while over 60 percent of the Qinling region has seen improved ecological quality. Areas with enhanced water conservation and soil retention functions account for about 60 percent and 47 percent of the region, respectively.

A natural boundary between China's north and south regions, the Qinling Mountains form a watershed between the basins of the country's two "mother rivers"—the Yellow River and the Yangtze River, and play a fundamental role in maintaining ecological balance, preserving biodiversity and supporting sustainable development.

Organ Donors

More than 733 million people in China have registered as organ donors, according to the China Organ Donation Administrative Center.

The country has so far recorded more than 65,000 cases of citizens donating after circulatory death, helping to save the lives of over 200,000 patients with organ failure and restoring sight to over 100,000 people.

Meanwhile, more than 69,000 whole-body donations have been completed, according to the center.

China has also established more than 380 memorial sites for organ donors nationwide, which hold commemorative events for organ donors each year around the deceased-honoring Qingming

Festival, which fell on April 5 this year.

In 2010, China launched pilot programs for posthumous organ donation and expanded them nationwide in 2013.

Protecting Vulnerable Groups

China's top judicial authorities have issued a new guideline to enhance the protection of rights for vulnerable groups, clarifying that those facing difficulties in litigation, such as migrant workers, persons with disabilities and minors, may apply for civil support prosecution, Xinhua News Agency reported on March 27.

The guideline, jointly released by the SPC and the Supreme People's Procuratorate in late March, outlines measures to ensure that vulnerable groups with limited litigation capacity can better access justice.

According to the document, procuratorates may support the filing of civil lawsuits for parties whose legitimate rights and interests have been violated and who are willing to pursue legal action but lack the capacity or are unable to do so independently.

In cases involving the violation of lawful rights and interests of minors where related organizations or individuals fail to bring a lawsuit, procuratorates may urge or support such action, the guideline states.

It specifies that individuals facing difficulties in filing lawsuits may seek civil support prosecution in situations including migrant workers pursuing unpaid wages, and persons with disabilities whose personal rights, property rights or other lawful rights and interests have been infringed.

Low-Carbon Development

The MEE said it will deepen cooperation with financial regulators and institutions to jointly advance the green and low-carbon development of private enterprises, Xinhua reported on March 26.

The remarks were made by Minister of Ecology and Environment Huang Runqiu at a recent symposium focused on facilitating the green and low-carbon development of China's private sector.

Efforts will be made to further ensure the effective operation



Heavy Lifter

A Changying-8 cargo unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) conducts a test flight at an airport in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, on March 31. It successfully completed the flight that day, making it China's first 7-ton-class cargo UAV to be validated through a flight test.

of the national carbon market and national trading market for voluntary greenhouse gas emission reduction, and help private enterprises turn surplus carbon emission allowances into assets, while accelerating the market-driven phasing-out of outdated production capacity, according to the ministry.

The ministry will also improve the use of fiscal capital, channel-

ing more resources toward key areas such as air, water and soil pollution control, as well as rural environmental governance.

Huang also stressed the need for ecological and environmental authorities to enhance information-sharing and coordination with financial regulators, to better guide financial resources to support the green and low-carbon transition of private enterprises.



The Homestay Effect

A homestay, which was converted from an idle building, in Dongcun Community, Songming County, Yunnan Province, on March 26. The once impoverished village has revitalized its abandoned rural houses and other spaces to develop sojourn tourism.

IoT Industry Scale

China has set a target for its core Internet of Things (IoT) industry to exceed 3.5 trillion yuan (\$505.8 billion) by 2028, according to an action plan jointly issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and other departments.

The plan states that by 2028, China aims to formulate or revise more than 50 advanced and applicable standards and increase the number of IoT terminal connections to 10 billion.

The IoT enables ubiquitous intelligent connections among humans, machines and objects through sensing technologies and communication networks, bridging the digital and physical worlds.

To foster innovation and development in the IoT sector, the action plan outlines five major measures, including promoting the innovation and upgrade of IoT devices, enhancing the service efficacy of IoT platforms, cultivating IoT application scenarios, strengthening the IoT network foundation and fostering a sound ecosystem for

IoT industry growth.

By 2028, new IoT technologies, products and business models are expected to continue emerging, with improved innovation capabilities across the industry, according to the plan. Breakthroughs will be made in key technologies such as sensing, networking and communication, data processing and security, which will raise the intelligence level of terminals and platforms.

External Debt

China's external debt remained generally stable, with outstanding external debt reaching nearly \$2.33 trillion by the end of last year, official data showed.

This figure was down \$15.5 billion, or 0.7 percent, from late 2024, according to data released by the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE) on March 27.

China's external debt currency structure had improved in 2025, while the maturity structure remained basically stable, Li Bin, deputy head and spokesperson

of the administration, said.

As of late 2025, local currency-denominated external debt accounted for 55.5 percent of the total, up 1.4 percentage points from the end of 2024, Li said.

In terms of maturity structure, medium- and long-term external debt accounted for 43.5 percent of the total by the end of 2025, down 0.6 percentage points from the end of 2024, Li noted.

Data also revealed that by the end of last year, China's ratio of outstanding external debt to GDP had stood at 11.9 percent, while the ratio of outstanding external debt to export revenue was 56.3 percent.

These indicators remained within internationally recognized safety thresholds, and China's external debt risks are generally controllable, Li explained.

Current Account Surplus

China registered a current account surplus of more than 5.24 trillion yuan (\$758 billion) last

year, according to data released by the SAFE on March 27.

The data also showed that the country's capital and financial account had posted a deficit of almost 5.52 trillion yuan (\$802 billion) in 2025.

As of late 2025, China's external financial assets had totaled nearly \$11.79 trillion, while external liabilities exceeded \$7.71 trillion, resulting in net external assets of over \$4.07 trillion.

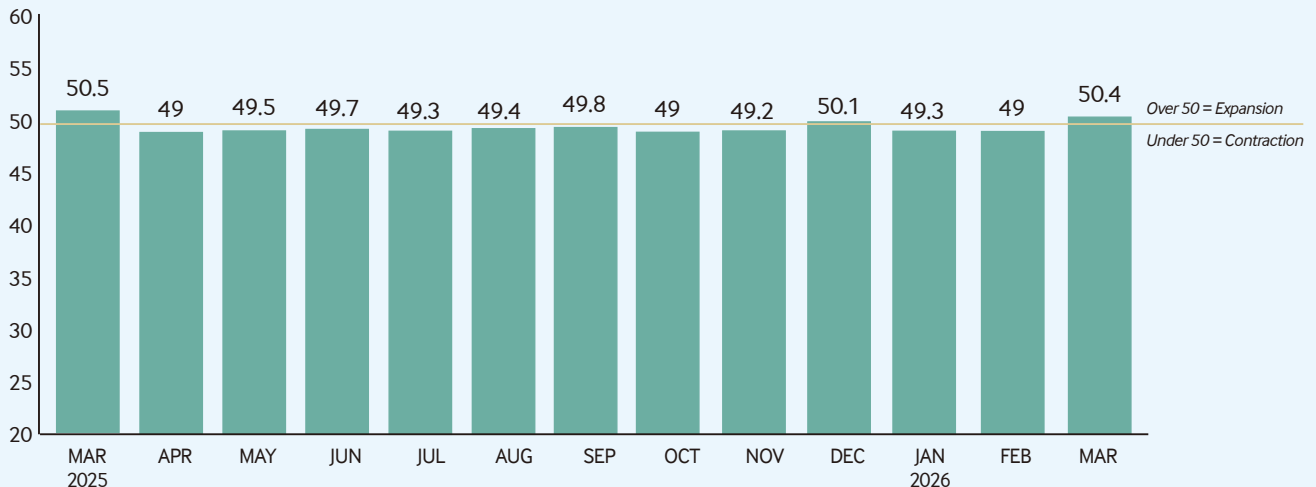
Sci-fi Industry

Total revenue of China's science fiction industry in 2025 amounted to 126.1 billion yuan (\$18 billion), according to a report released by the China Research Institute for Science Popularization on March 27.

The total revenue has exceeded the 100-billion-yuan (\$14.5-billion) mark for three consecutive years, and the industry is steadily entering a new stage of high-quality development, the institute said at the China Science Fiction Convention 2026 in Beijing.

NUMBERS

China's Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI)



The report covered five core sectors of the sci-fi industry—literature, films and TV shows, video games, derivative products and themed tourism, highlighting the annual development trends and future trajectories of China’s sci-fi industry.

Industrial Profits

Profits of China’s major industrial firms increased 15.2 percent year on year in the first two months of 2026, with emerging sectors such as equipment manufacturing and hi-tech manufacturing serving as major growth drivers, official data showed on March 27.

Industrial firms with an annual main business revenue of at least 20 million yuan (\$2.9 million) saw their combined profits hit 1.02 trillion yuan (\$148 billion) during the January-February period, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said.

From January to February, multiple regions and departments intensified the implementation of more proactive and effective macro policies,

focusing on leveraging the integrated effects of existing and new policies. As a result, profits of major industrial firms accelerated in growth, with most industries seeing a rebound in profits, according to the NBS.

Smart Shipping

China has unveiled a new action plan to accelerate the deep integration of cutting-edge technologies such as AI with the shipping industry, aiming to foster new quality productive forces in the sector.

This term refers to the shift toward innovation-driven growth, technological advancement and high-quality development in different sectors of the economy.

The action plan, jointly issued by the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council and the State Administration for Market Regulation, outlines the overall requirements, key tasks and

support measures for developing smart shipping in China during the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period, according to the Ministry of Transport.

The plan sets out a two-phase development roadmap.

By 2027, China aims to achieve the deep integration of AI with core shipping elements, make breakthroughs in key technologies, establish more than three comprehensive smart shipping pilot zones, open over five pilot routes, develop more than 10 replicable typical smart shipping scenarios and operate over 100 smart vessels.

By 2030, the country expects to achieve full mastery of core technologies, establish a new model of coordinated development encompassing technology, industry and governance, and reach internationally advanced levels in smart shipping development.

To meet these targets, the action plan systematically deploys 11 crucial tasks across four dimensions: breakthroughs in technology and equipment,

empowering application pilots, upgrading infrastructure and enhancing regulatory governance.

Medical Equipment Market

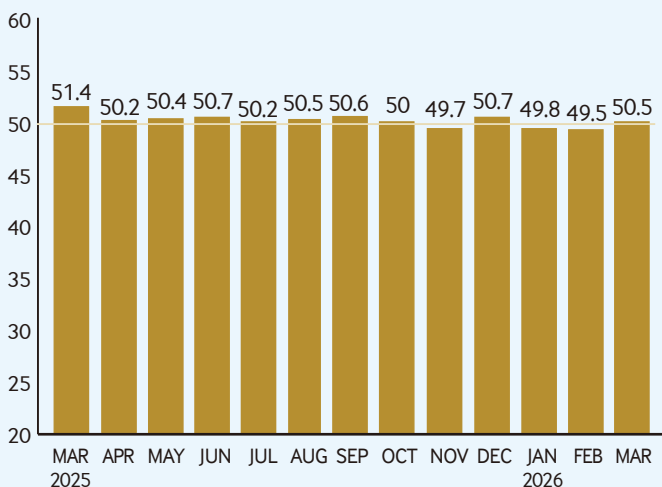
China’s medical equipment market expanded by 60.5 percent in the 2021-25 period, maintaining its position as the world’s second largest single-country market, according to the China Association of Medical Equipment.

The 2026 China Medical Equipment Conference, which opened in Chongqing Municipality on March 27, unveiled the related figures.

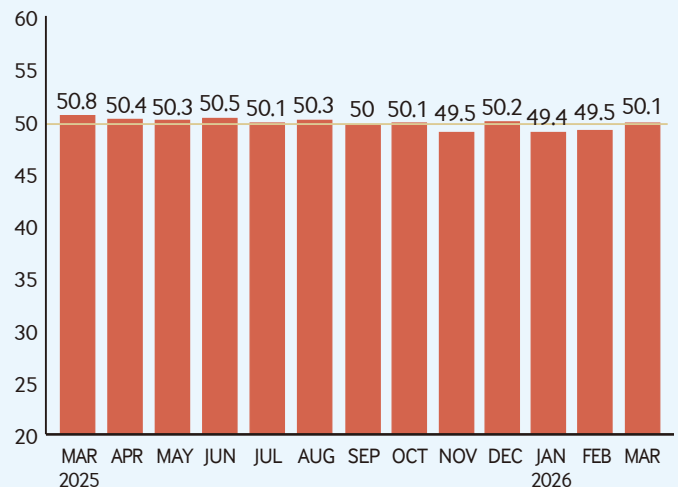
The association noted that the country’s market size reached 1.44 trillion yuan (\$208 billion) in 2025.

The export of medical equipment totaled \$45.8 billion in 2025, up 62.4 percent compared with 2019, the association said, adding that China’s medical equipment sector has been shifting from a cost-driven competitive edge to one based on technology and brand strength.

China’s Comprehensive PMI



China’s Non-Manufacturing PMI



(Source: National Bureau of Statistics)



SERBIA

Attendees at a ceremony to mark the 27th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and honor its victims in Vranje on March 24



JAPAN

A protest against the Japanese Government's deployment of long-range missiles with counterstrike capabilities in Kumamoto and Shizuoka prefectures, in Tokyo on March 31



INDONESIA

Rescuers work in the waters of South Bolaang Mongondow, North Sulawesi, on March 31. A joint search and rescue team successfully rescued all 21 crew members of the motor vessel *Nazila 05* after the boat sank





DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Top leader Kim Jong Un inspects a special operations training base on March 29



BURUNDI

Smoke rises following explosions at a military camp in Bujumbura Province on March 31



MYANMAR

Members of the Pyithu Hluttaw, one of the country's houses of parliament, cast votes during the second day of meetings in Nay Pyi Taw on March 31. U Nyo Saw was elected vice president

THIS WEEK PEOPLE & POINTS

↓ MOTORCYCLE MAKER BREAKS NEW GROUND

Entrepreneur **Zhang Xue** made history last month, becoming the first Chinese national to lead a homegrown brand to claim a world title in motorcycle racing. ZXMOTO, the team of the eponymous Chongqing-based motorcycle manufacturer Zhang founded, secured back-to-back victories in the World Supersport category at the Portuguese round of the Superbike World Championship in late March. The win broke the long-standing dominance of European, Japanese and American brands.

Born into a rural family in Huaihua, Hunan Province, Zhang dropped out of school at 14 and apprenticed at a motorcycle repair shop. After years as a motorcycle stunt rider and mechanic, Zhang noted China still could not produce a high-performance racing engine. “Since I can’t be the fastest rider, I’ll build the bike that will get Chinese riders to the front,” he said at the time.



Legal Shield Against Abuse

Nanfang Daily
March 31

On March 30, the Supreme People’s Court, China’s highest court, released a series of landmark anti-domestic violence cases that highlight the country’s evolving judicial stance on both physical and psychological abuse. The cases reaffirm that verbal humiliation, social isolation and controlling behavior within families constitute domestic violence under the law. One featured case clarifies the legal recognition of psychological abuse—demonstrating its concealed, continuous

and deliberate nature—and dispels the misconception that “verbal conflict” is merely a private matter.

The court also addressed a long-debated issue concerning divorce rulings in violent marriages, emphasizing that if domestic violence is verified, courts must approve the divorce request without compromise. Marking the 10th anniversary of China’s Anti-Domestic Violence Law, the statement reflects a decade of progress in legislation, enforcement and public education. Evidence such as chat records and videos now plays a critical role in proving abuse, gradually overcoming barriers to justice. Additionally, more than 33,000 personal safety protection orders have been issued nationwide, forming a key legal safeguard.



Building a Greener Shanxi

Outlook
March 30

During his inspections in Shanxi Province, a major coal producer, in 2017 and 2025, President Xi Jinping underscored that the national emphasis on green development represents a profound transformation in China’s development philosophy. Xi called for extraordinary efforts to change economic growth models, control pollution, restore ecosystems, use resources efficiently and improve eco-civilization systems. He further emphasized the need for more integrated governance of mountains,

“Xiongan is building a smart city from scratch, which gives startups plenty of room to grow.”

Li Qiang, founder of Huaqing Zhiyan, an AI agent company in Xiongan New Area, inaugurated in Hebei Province on April 1, 2017, with the aim of becoming China’s “city of the future,” in a recent interview with Xinhua News Agency

“The development of contemporary sci-fi is closely linked to China’s modernization. It is this grand process that has made China a country brimming with a sense of the future.”

Li Cixin, Hugo Award-winning author of *The Three-Body Problem*, at the 2026 China Science Fiction Convention, held in Beijing in late March

waters, air and cities—highlighting the importance of desertification control, soil conservation, mine rehabilitation and ecological security.

Since 2021, Shanxi has achieved historic breakthroughs in environmental quality. Levels of six major air pollutants have met the national Grade II standards, the benchmark for most cities in China that means they do not cause harm to most people, while all 16 Yellow River tributaries in the province have reached an excellent water quality standard. Ecological restoration capacity has increased, energy intensity has dropped to one of the lowest levels nationwide and annual energy consumption growth of just 2 percent supports a 5-percent GDP increase.

Shanxi has treated the Taihang and Luliang mountains as crucial ecological shields, launching large-scale restoration projects across fragile zones and mining areas. For active mines, the province has embedded ecological restoration responsibilities throughout the mining process, with enterprises depositing over 80 billion yuan (\$11.6 billion) into an environmental governance and restoration fund.

Green Qingming Practices

Beijing Evening News
March 31

Visits to Beijing's cemeteries reached their annual peak in the weeks leading up to Qingming Festival, or Tomb-Sweeping Day, on April 5 this year. To enhance public convenience, public transit providers opened 10 special bus routes to major cemeteries, while police and traffic authorities guided the flow of people and vehicles. Every step, from arrival to departure, was designed to make the experience smooth and reassuring.

More importantly, modern and eco-conscious methods of remembrance were promoted. For example, to provide an environmentally friendlier alternative to the traditional practice of burning joss paper or spirit money as an offering to ancestors, many cemeteries this year continued to offer free flowers and blessing cards to visitors.

Although traditional practices like burning spirit money persist, public awareness and cemetery-led initiatives are gradually reshaping habits into safer ones. Qingming, a day for honoring ancestors, now symbolizes not only remembrance but also progress toward a greener and more eco-friendly approach to celebrating one's ancestors.

DATA LEADER TAKES GLOBAL HELM

Tan Tieniu, a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), China's highest academic institution in science and technology, was elected as the inaugural chairman of the World Data Organization on March 30. The Beijing-based organization is the world's first international professional body dedicated to advancing data development and governance practices.

Tan, 63, is also secretary of the Communist Party of China Nanjing University Committee, the university's top leadership position. Between 1984 and 1997, he completed his master's and doctoral degrees at Imperial College London and worked at the University of Reading in the UK, before returning to China to join the CAS Institute of Automation, where he later served as president. Tan's research focuses on image processing, computer vision and pattern recognition. He has published some 10 books and holds more than 100 patents.



“Film and TV content not only helps boost user engagement, but is also expected to fuel merchandise sales in turn, creating a virtuous cycle between content and products.”

Yang Huaiyu, a consumer sector analyst, in an interview with Xinhua about the announcement of a film featuring Labubu, one of the most beloved characters from the Chinese designer toy brand Pop Mart

“We hope that this designation will help strengthen conservation efforts and draw more international support to protect the region's unique and threatened natural heritage.”

Lu Limin, a professor from the Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, in an interview with Xinhua about the designation of the world's 37th global biodiversity hotspot in central China



COURTESY PHOTO

Artists perform *The Leading Voices of Musicals*, a series produced by the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center that brings together the classic excerpts from Western musicals

COVER STORY

STAGE FEVER

The curtain is rising on a new era for China's theater industry By Zhang Yage

For Li Menghan, a 25-year-old interior designer in Beijing, 2025 was the year of the theater.

It started almost by accident in January, when a friend dragged her to see an experimental drama at a small theater in Chaoyang District.

"I didn't expect much, since the show cost only 60 yuan (\$8.67)," she told *Beijing Review*. "But something clicked. The intimacy of the space and the energy between

the actors and the audience felt completely different from watching a movie or attending a big concert."

By the end of 2025, Li had been to 17 shows ranging from immersive Peking Opera fusions to a sold-out run of *The Phantom of the Opera* at the nationally renowned Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center.

"I'm not alone in this," Li said. "Among my friends, going to the theater has become as normal as going to the movies, and there are all kinds of performances on weekends."

Li's personal transformation is part of a nationwide phenomenon. According to data released this January by the China Association of Performing

Arts (CAPA), box office revenue from commercial performances at theaters in 2025 contributed a staggering 616.55 billion yuan (\$89.05 billion), a 6.39-percent year-on-year increase. Total audience numbers had surged from approximately 117.6 million in 2015 to 194 million in 2025, representing a remarkable 65-percent increase over the decade. "The current boom in theater performances is the result of multiple positive factors," Luo Qun, Deputy Director of the China