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THREE ENDANGERED RED-FOOTED TORTOISES WERE FOUND IN A PLASTIC BAG IN A PRIVATE VEHICLE TRYING TO EXIT MAINLAND CHINA FROM DELTA BRIDGE

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GUANGDONG MOVES AHEAD WITH THE THIRD BOND ISSUANCE IN MACAU

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INDIA LANDS A SPACECRAFT NEAR THE MOON'S SOUTH POLE

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AP PHOTO



China Dozens of cranes lift blocks weighing several tons and drop them to compact the soil of a roughly one-square-mile area on Peru's Pacific coast, part of China's most ambitious port project in Latin America designed to facilitate trade between the regions. The port of Chancay, 60 kilometers north of the Peruvian capital of Lima, will be "the gateway from South America to Asia," said Mario de las Casas, institutional affairs manager of COSCO Shipping, a Chinese state-owned company that is the majority owner of the project. **More on p6**

AP PHOTO



Pakistan Schoolchildren who were rescued from a broken cable car dangling high above a valley in Pakistan said that they repeatedly feared death was imminent during the 16-hour ordeal even as their parents tried to console them over the phone. Six children and two adults were pulled from the cable car in a daring rescue. One of the youngest was grabbed by a commando attached to a helicopter by rope, while others were lowered to the ground in a makeshift chairlift constructed from a wooden bed frame and ropes.

AP PHOTO



Egypt Two tankers carrying oil products and liquefied natural gas collided in the Suez Canal, disrupting traffic through the global waterway, Egyptian authorities said yesterday. The Suez Canal authority said in a statement that the BW Lesmes, a Singapore-flagged tanker that carries liquefied natural gas, suffered a mechanical malfunction on Tuesday night and ran aground while transiting through the canal. The Burri, a Cayman Island-flagged oil products tanker, collided with the broken vessel.

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JAPAN TRAVELERS INSPECTED

Following Macau ban on food product imports from 10 prefectures in Japan, starting today, travelers face added customs inspections

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HORSE RACING
JOCKEY CLUB FACING THE BLUES

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BANKING
BCM SURPASSES MAIN MARKET PERFORMANCE AMID CHALLENGES

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IPIM BOASTS YEAR-OVER-YEAR RISE IN MICE FIGURES

The Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) yesterday boasted in a statement that in the first half of this year the city saw 490 MICE activities, surpassing last year's 477 activities. The first half of the year also saw 15-fold more exhibitors and visitors year-over-year. There were 700,000 participants this year, a 50% increase year-over-year. Last year, Macau was under Covid-19 restrictions. Not only was quarantine-upon-arrival in place, but non-Greater China residents were not even allowed to enter Macau.

ECONOMIC SECRETARY CONGRATULATES MACAU WINNERS IN GLOBAL IT CONTEST

The Secretary for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong, has congratulated the Macau contestants competing in a global software skills competition involving Microsoft Office and Adobe apps. The Macau team garnered two global champions, two second places and a fifth place in the former contest, as well as a tenth place in the latter one. These are the best results since the Macau team started participating in the two contests. The competition was held in Orlando, US. Lei hoped the contestants can share their experiences with fellow youths to encourage them to get a tighter grip of IT knowledge.

MGTO IN FULL SWING TO ATTRACT FOREIGN TOURISTS

The Macao Government Tourism Office has closed deals with airline companies to offer flight ticket promotions to tourists from Singapore, Korea, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam. For example, from April to December, those purchasing Air Macau tickets from these five locations will be entitled to buy-one-get-one free. Tigerair Taiwan will run promotions to attract Taiwanese tourists from July to September. AirAsia Malaysia will run promotions from August to December. The Office is also planning to run multi-stop tickets with Cathay Pacific. The Office will also maintain its momentum to run roadshows in different locations.

BANKING

BCM SHAREHOLDERS RECOVER STABILITY, ISSUE INTERIM DIVIDENDS

ANTHONY LAM

The two parent companies of local BCM have stabilized after the ending of disease control measures, issuing interim dividends of HKD0.36 and HKD0.11 per share.

Dah Sing Financial Holdings Limited (DSFH) announced yesterday its interim results for the period ended 30 June 2023. Profit attributable to shareholders rose by 9% year-on-year to HKD922 million amidst the gradual recovery in the Hong Kong economy in the first half of 2023. Earnings per share for the period amounted to HKD2.89. The Board of Directors declared an interim dividend of HKD0.36 per share, in contrast to HKD0.33 per share for 1H2022.

Meanwhile, Dah Sing Banking Group Limited (DSBG) reported a 1% year-on-year increase in profit attributable to shareholders to HKD1,112 million for the period ended 30 June 2023. Earnings per share was HKD0.79. The Board of Directors declared an interim dividend of HKD0.11, in contrast to HKD0.10 for 1H2022, per share.

DSBG's operating profit after credit impairment losses rose 8% year-on-year to HK\$1,001 million. Net interest income grew 12% year-on-year compared to the first half of 2022. Net interest margin improved by 8 bps to 1.93% compared to the 2022 average of 1.85%. This was achieved through yield improvements in its interest earning assets and its strong focus on deposit cost management.

Net fee and commission income fell 22% year-on-year during the period as customer investment appetite remained subdued given the Hong Kong stock market weakness and the global market volatility. The lower fee and commission income was also partly attributable to the termination of its previous bancassurance distribution agreement in July 2022, which resulted in no related fee amortization in the first half of 2023 in contrast with the same period last year. Net trading and other income dropped sharply by 64% year-on-year during the period, mainly impacted by the higher funding swap

ANTHONY LAM



cost due to the widened USD-HKD interest rate gap during the half year.

DSBG's credit impairment losses fell by 49% during the period, driven by prudent credit risk management and improved economic conditions. Its impaired loan ratio fell slightly by 1 bp to 1.85% from 1.86% at the end of 2022.

Dah Sing Bank's (DSB) exclusive 15-year bancassurance partnership with Sun Life Hong Kong Limited, announced in January

2023, was officially launched in July 2023 with encouraging early results.

Meanwhile, DSB has announced the opening of its new Shenzhen Branch at the beginning of this month, marking an important milestone as the first foreign bank in mainland China to be granted a dual operating license to set up a local branch in addition to its locally incorporated wholly-owned bank, Dah Sing Bank (China) Limited.

Asked if the Country Garden saga in mainland China will exert high pressure on the enterprises' financial sturdiness, the panel of executives said the matter "would only pose minute risks on the enterprises, for only a micro number of shares are being held" by the banking group.

It has been revealed that Country Garden, a mega serial real property development in mainland China, has fallen into financial difficulties.

BCM SURPASSES MAIN MARKET PERFORMANCE AMID MULTIPLE CHALLENGES

At the online press conference announcing the results, the panel of DSFH executives disclosed that "although there have been multiple challenges facing BCM, its performances have well surpassed those of the market."

It was also disclosed that the local bank has garnered increased amounts in loans and customer deposits.

"There was also low double-digit increase year-over-year in terms of total operational income," the panel of executives highlighted. Net income has also seen an increase due to decreased loan impairment.

When asked by the Times if the parent companies would further expand their interactions with BCM to provide services such as opening DSB credit cards and bank accounts at or through BCM, the panel of executives said that room for development in both personal and corporate products and services will be explored constantly.

As the owner of the Macau Insurance Company, the two enterprises have also highlighted that despite the fact that several claims related to Covid-19 infections were made to the company, the insurance agency is still intact in terms of financial status. **AL**

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Macau bans food product imports from 10 prefectures in Japan

RENATO MARQUES

THE Macau government has officially banned food products from 10 prefectures of Japan.

The ban was officialized yesterday in a Chief Executive (CE) order published in the government's official gazette.

The ban on the import of fresh food products comes after Japanese authorities announced water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant would soon be discharged into the ocean.

In a press statement, the Macau government was said to "strongly deplore" the discharge of radiation-contaminated waters.

To safeguard food safety and public health in Macau, the government will ban the import of live and fresh food products, food products of animal origin, sea salt and seaweed, including vegetables, fruits, milk and milk products, aquatic products and their derivatives, meat and meat products and poultry eggs, among other products.

The ban affects products from 10 prefectures and regions, namely Fukushima, Chiba, Tochigi, Ibaraki, Gunma, Miyagi, Niigata, Nagano, Saitama and the Tokyo Metropolis, from Aug. 24.

"Japan's decision to discharge the nuclear-contaminated water into the ocean without ample consultation with its neighboring countries is extremely irresponsible," the local government added, noting it is highly concerned.

The Municipal Affairs Bureau



(IAM) has been ordered to keep close contact with the General Administration of Customs and Gongbei Customs District of the People's Republic of China, and a notification mechanism has also been established with Hong Kong's Centre of Food Safety.

As for the other prefectures and regions of Japan, the IAM said it will reinforce its surveillance of all food imports arriving in Macau, namely on its testing for radioactive substances, the Head of the Division of Food Inspection of IAM, Sou Hoi Chi, said yesterday during a media tour to the import inspection area of the Macau International Airport.

CUSTOMS TO ADD INSPECTIONS TO TRAVELERS ARRIVING FROM JAPAN

THE Macao Customs Service (SA) will enforce added vigilance and inspection over all travelers arriving in Macau from Japan, Kong Hong, Acting Chief of Islands Customs Inspection Division, told the media yesterday in a briefing after a tour to the import inspection area of the Macau International Airport.

The measure complements several local government measures to address food products arriving from Japan and suspected of potential radioactive contamination.

Kong said the SA will also have closer supervision and inspection over all products as well as people arriving from Japan, in addition to the Municipal

Affairs Bureau's (IAM) inspection of imported food products, including the ban on all food products from 10 Japanese prefectures and regions.

He said the SA is mostly concerned about the potential for travelers to carry banned products into Macau in their luggage.

The same official also called on local residents, when returning to Macau after traveling to Japan, not to bring any food products to facilitate the process and to avoid having those items confiscated at the immigration point. A similar inspection will be processed for all visitors arriving in Macau from Japan via the airport. **RM**

IAM began testing all imported Japanese food products at the beginning of this year.

Now, IAM claims testing for specific radionuclides has been added as a routine food safety test item as well as sampling from the different batches of products tested in the IAM Food Safety laboratory.

According to IAM information, from Jan. 1 to Aug. 21, 23,137 radiation tests on samples of imported Japanese food were conducted and 160 samples for radionuclide testing were collected without any reported abnormalities.

Concurrently, IAM will also increase inspections of retail stores in the city using handheld radiation measuring instruments mainly on non-staple food products, such as pre-packaged food products like rice, seaweed, tea leaves and snacks, imported from other regions in Japan not usually subject to tests and inspections.

"Food samples will also be taken for testing for radionuclides," IAM said, adding that a dedicated webpage will also be launched where daily reports will be published to "increase the transparency and cultivate the scientific knowledge of the population."

Impacts perceived for Japanese restaurants

RENATO MARQUES

THE enforcement of a food product import ban from today against 10 Japanese prefectures will potentially impact Japanese cuisine restaurants in Macau, the president of the United Association of Food and Beverage Merchants of Macau (UAFBMM), Chan Chak Mo, said in an interview with Chinese Channel TDM.

Chan, a lawmaker and an Executive Director of Future Bright Holdings, Ltd, a company mostly dedicated to the food and beverage industry, which also owns several Japanese restaurants in Macau, said the association has had several



meetings with the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) officials over the past few months and that they were already aware of this potential further step from the local authorities.

He also said that to minimize the impacts on the business, many Japanese restaurant owners were already finding new sources such as South Korea, Russia and Taiwan for the import

of some of the food products now affected by the ban.

The UAFBMM president believed it unlikely that importing food items from sources other than Japan would increase prices.

"Usually the products from Japan are generally the most expensive ones," he said.

The president of the Macau Catering Industry Association, Lei Iam Leong, expressed a similar opinion.

Lei told the media the industry was informed with enough time to search for other supply chains, while a difference in the prices should not be reflected as the Japanese products are usually the most expensive ones.

According to Lei, it is expected that "only 10% of the restaurants" will be affected by the import ban enforced by IAM from today.

To avoid a potential reaction from the market, Chan suggested restaurant owners place notices at the restaurants stating that the products on sale have all been inspected by the IAM and are in accordance with all food safety regulations.

NO CHANGES IN LOCAL HABITS

According to a Times observation during the day, so far, no Japanese restaurant has posted any notices on the topic nor any change in the business flow with residents, at least for now, con-

tinuing with their habits.

Questioned by the Times while exiting a Japanese restaurant in the central district, a resident who preferred to be identified by the name of Wilson said that he and his girlfriend are fans of Japanese cuisine and that he eats at Japanese restaurants at least twice a week.

He told the Times that he does not believe that there is any contamination of the food products from Japan, "otherwise Japan would be stopping their selling [in the] first [place]," he said, noting that what is on the line is "once again," a "political matter between China and Japan."

"I will continue to eat Japanese food the same way if the restaurants are open and have the items available for sale," he concluded.

JOCKEY CLUB FACING THE BLUES

STAFF REPORTER

THE future of horse racing in Macau appears to be hanging in the balance, with growing concerns among trainers, officials and stakeholders that the Macau Jockey Club (MJC) may soon lose its right to operate racing events in the Special Administrative Region (SAR).

However, TDM reported late yesterday that the company has already set the starting date of next season: Sept. 29. And that any disputes with 82 employees will be settled swiftly.

This troubling situation has emerged against a backdrop of significant challenges facing the industry, including a dramatic decline in the number of horses, dwindling race frequencies and financial losses.

According to reports from the Asian Racing Report, Macau's horse population has plummeted from a peak of 1,200 two decades ago to a mere 220.

This sharp reduction raises questions about the sustainability of horse racing in the region.

Furthermore, the number of races held annually has dwindled from 1,200 in 2003, which was more than Hong Kong hosted at



the time, to just a single meet with a handful of races each week. This significant drop in race frequency has raised concerns about the vitality of the sport in Macau.

Adding to these concerns are claims made by MJC employees who assert that the organization has not expanded its workforce post-pandemic and has halted the recruitment of new staff altogether. These employment trends

may reflect a larger issue of financial strain and uncertainty within the club.

One of the pivotal moments that has heightened anxiety surrounding the future of horse racing in Macau is the belief that the upcoming season finale could be the club's last.

Despite the MJC's claims earlier this year that it had undertaken renovations, including upgrading

horse swimming pools, stables, the main racing building's first to fifth floors, and some racetrack improvements, there remains an atmosphere of uncertainty. A trainer expressed concern to the Asian Racing Report, highlighting the lack of information about next season's meetings and speculating about possible staff cuts. Clarity is eagerly sought after by all stakeholders.

The situation was further complicated when a shipment of 30 horses from Australia bound for Macau was halted in July, reportedly on orders from Macau authorities. This incident has raised eyebrows and deepened the sense of uncertainty surrounding the industry's future.

These challenges have emerged in the context of deteriorating financial performance for the MJC, which reported accumulated losses of MOP\$2.1 billion (US\$260 million) through 2022, representing a MOP\$200 million (US\$25 million) increase over the past year. Horse racing revenue also declined, dropping to MOP\$39 million (US\$4.8 million) in 2022 from MOP\$47 million (US\$5.8 million) in 2021.

In 2018, the MJC had committed to investing MOP\$1.5 billion (US\$186 million) to upgrade facilities, including hotels and restaurants, in exchange for the 24-year extension of its concession until August 31, 2042. This extension was a significant departure from the shorter-term extensions it had received in previous years. The hope was that this extended concession would allow the MJC to address its financial woes, which had seen the Macau Horse Racing Co accumulate losses every year since 2005, totaling MOP\$4.1 billion (US\$507 million) by 2016.

FINANCE

GUANGDONG MOVES AHEAD WITH THE THIRD BOND ISSUANCE IN MACAU LATER THIS MONTH

RENATO MARQUES

THE People's Government of Guangdong Province will issue offshore bonds for the third consecutive year, the local government has announced.

According to a government statement, the new issuance "showcases the Central government and the Guangdong government's support for Macau's efforts to develop a modern financial industry," as well as, "a recognition of Macau's function as a green-financing platform."

The first and second issuance in Macau of the Guangdong government offshore renminbi-denominated bonds happened respectively in October 2021 and October 2022.

In the third issuance, the Guangdong government will issue in Macau, by the end of this month, two tranches of offshore renminbi-denominated provincial government bonds. On aggregate, it is expected that the issued principal amount will reach RMB2 billion.

One of the batches proposed will have a two-year maturi-



ty, while the second will have a three-year maturity. The last will be designated a "green" bond, which is the first time this type of bond will be issued locally. Both will be available to institutional investors.

According to the same local government statement, the continuous issuance of bonds in Macau will promote relationships between local financial services and those of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area.

Local authorities are also said

to be working to optimize local infrastructure and resources to support a financial market, including enhancing the Macau Central Securities Depository system as well as related laws and regulations for a bond market.

Concurrently, the government is also working on making the issuance of treasury bonds and provincial-government bonds a routine practice and encouraging a greater number of institutions to carry out investment and financing activities in Macau.

ENDANGERED TORTOISES SMUGGLED INTO MACAU

THREE endangered red-footed tortoises were found in a plastic bag in a private vehicle trying to exit mainland China from the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, the Gongbei Customs has announced.

The reptiles were confirmed to be the endangered species on Aug. 15. During the small hours on July 28, the driver of a vehicle on the northbound travel for Macau vehicles scheme was seen to act stealthily while trying to pass the im-

migration checkpoint on the bridge to Macau.

While searching the vehicle, Customs officers found a plastic bag under the second row of seats, which contained three tortoises. Their carapace is oblong, crimson black, with light yellow plaques in the center of each scutellum, and large scales on the front of the forelimbs, which are red in color.

They were sent for lab examinations and were confirmed to be the endangered spe-

cies. The species is protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The Gongbei Customs has reminded the public that according to laws and regulations in China, no endangered species should be imported or exported unless otherwise permitted by competent national authorities. Violations are a criminal offense and violators can be prosecuted under the law. AL



YURI KAGEYAMA, TOKYO

TECH

KAZUTAKA Yonekura dreams of a world where everyone will have their very own digital “clone” — an online avatar that could take on some of our work and daily tasks, such as appearing in Zoom meetings in our place.

Yonekura, chief executive of Tokyo startup Alt Inc., believes it could make our lives easier and more efficient.

His company is developing a digital double, an animated image that looks and talks just like its owner. The digital clone can be used, for example, by a recruiter to carry out preliminary job interviews, or by a physician to screen patients ahead of checkups.

“This liberates you from all the routine (tasks) that you must do tomorrow, the day after tomorrow and the day after that,” he told The Associated Press as he showed off his double — a thumbnail video image of Yonekura on the computer screen, with a synthesized version of his voice.

When his digital clone is asked “What kind of music do you like,” it pauses for several seconds, then goes into a long-winded explanation about Yonekura’s fondness for energetic rhythmic music such as hip-hop or rock ‘n’ roll.

A bit mechanical perhaps — but any social gaffes have been programmed out.

Yonekura, 46, argues that the technology is more personal than Siri, ChatGPT or Google AI. Most importantly, it belongs to you and not the technology company that created it, he said.

For now, having a digital double is expensive. Each Alt clone costs about 20 million yen (\$140,000), so it will likely take some time before there’s a clone for everyone.

In creating a digital double, information about a person is skimmed off social media sites and publicly available records in a massive data collection effort, and stored in the software. The data is constantly updated, keeping in synch with the owner’s changing habits and tastes.

Yonekura believes a digital clone could pave the way for a society where people can focus on being creative and waste less time on tedious interactions.

Digital clones and Vocaloids may be popular in Japan. Elsewhere, they could get lost in translation



Kazutaka Yonekura, chief executive of Tokyo startup Alt Inc. demonstrates his digital clone on a personal computer at his office in Tokyo

For many Japanese — the nation that gave the world Pokemon, karaoke, Hello Kitty and emojis — the digital clone is as friendly as an animation character.

But Yonekura acknowledges cultures are different and that Westerners may not like the idea of a digital clone as much.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked: Why does it have to be a personal clone, and not just a digital agent?” he said, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

Yonekura’s company has drawn mostly domestic investments of more than 6 billion yen (\$40 million), including venture capital funds run by major Japanese banks, while also building collaborative relationships with academia, including the University of Southern California and the University of Tokyo.

But large-scale production of digital doubles is a long way off — for now, the company offers more affordable voice recognition software and virtual assistant technology.

Matt Alt, who co-founded AltJapan Co., a company that produces English-language versions of popular Japanese video games and who has written books about Japan, including “Pure Invention: How Japan Made the Modern World,” says the digital clone idea makes more

sense culturally in Japan.

Ninjas, the famous feudal Japanese undercover warriors, were known for “bunshin-jutsu” techniques of creating the illusion of a double or a helper in battle to confuse the opponent. The bunshin-jutsu idea has been adopted and is common in modern-day Japanese video games and manga comic books and graphic novels.

“Who wouldn’t want a helping hand from someone who understood them intimately?” Alt said but added that in the West, the idea of an existing double is “more frightening.”

“There is the ‘Invasion of the Body Snatchers,’ for instance, or even the brooms that multiply like a virus in Disney’s ‘Fantasia,’” he said.

INCS toenter Co., another Tokyo-based startup, has been successful as a production company of computerized music for animation, manga, films, virtual realities and games that uses so-called Vocaloid artists. The synthesized singers or musical acts known as Vocaloid are often paired up with anime- or manga-style characters.

Like Yonekura’s digital clone, Vocaloids are an example of Japanese technology that uses computer software to duplicate human traits or likeness.

Among INCS toenter’s hits is “Melt,” created on

a single desktop in 2007 and performed by a group called Supercell, which has

been played 23 million times on YouTube.

A more recent hit is “Kawaikute gomen,” which means “Sorry for being so cute,” by HoneyWorks, a vocaloid unit. Another is Eve, who performs the theme song of megahit animation series “Jujutsu Kaisen,” and has 4.6 million subscribers on his YouTube channel.

Some wonder whether digital clones or Vocaloids could become popular outside Japan. Digital assistant and voice software, as well as computerized music exist in the West, but they are not clones or Vocaloids.

Yu Tamura, chief execu-

tive and founder of INCS toenter, says he is encouraged by the increasing global popularity of Japanese animation and manga but that one thing to watch out for is the “Galapagos syndrome.”

The term, referring to the isolated Pacific islands where animals evolved in unique ways, is widely used in Japan to describe how some Japanese products, while successful at home, fail to translate abroad.

Overseas consumers could see it as quirky or too cutesy, except for Japansophiles, Tamura said.

“They simply won’t get it,” he said. MDT/AP

AD

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CAM reserves the right to reject any Proposal in whole or in part without stating any reason.

BRI Chinese-backed port project in Peru to be the 'gateway from South America to Asia,' official says

FRANKLIN BRICEÑO,
CHANCAY

DOZENS of cranes lift blocks weighing several tons and drop them to compact the soil of a roughly one-square-mile area on Peru's Pacific coast, part of China's most ambitious port project in Latin America designed to facilitate trade between the regions.

The port of Chancay, 60 kilometers north of the Peruvian capital of Lima, will be "the gateway from South America to Asia," said Mario de las Casas, institutional affairs manager of COSCO Shipping, a Chinese state-owned company that is the majority owner of the project.

De las Casas said the \$1.3 billion project will offer a direct route to China with a travel time reduction for ships of 10 days. COSCO officials say ships traveling from South America to China normally take more than 45 days with stops in Central America, Mexico or the United States.



Cranes work in the construction of the Chancay Multipurpose Port Terminal, built by a Chinese company in Chancay, Peru

Offering a deep water port, Chancay will be able to handle container ships that can't dock elsewhere in South America.

De las Casas said the port is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. "China has been investing in infrastructure and logistics

around the world for years. There are ports in Greece, in Spain, in Africa, all over the world." Isaac B. Kardon, a senior fellow

at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace - who has researched China's maritime affairs - estimated that as of July 2020 there were at least 95 ports in the world operated in whole or in part by Chinese capital.

Kardon, formerly an adjunct professor at the U.S. Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute, said "Chancay is a strategic investment for COSCO, China's largest and most globally competitive state-owned shipping company."

"This long-term project reflects a concerted Chinese strategy to extend its maritime trade and logistics footprint to all of the key maritime points on the globe," he said.

This global port gamble by Chinese firms is raising concerns among U.S. officials.

"I see the concern from a commercial point of view," said De las Casas, the COSCO official, pointing out that the Chinese state-owned company is present in 37 ports around the world, including in Los Angeles, California.

COSCO Shipping holds a 60% stake in the Chancay port with Peru's Volcan holding the other 40%.

Its first stage is to be completed by the end of 2024. The containers will arrive at and leave the port through a 1.8-kilometer tunnel, the construction of which was halted in May following the collapse of part of the surface.

The company says work in the tunnel area will resume in the next few days. **MDT/AP**

SOUTH CHINA SEA

China coast guard blocks Philippine vessels near disputed shoal

As a U.S. Navy plane circled overhead, two Philippine boats breached a Chinese coast guard blockade in a dangerous confrontation this week in the disputed South China Sea to deliver food and other supplies to Filipino forces guarding a contested shoal.

Two Philippine coast guard vessels escorting the supply boats, however, were blocked by at least four Chinese coast guard ships for about five hours in the tense standoff off Second Thomas Shoal.

The encounter is the latest flare-up from the long-seething territorial disputes in the busy sea that involve China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei. It's regarded as an Asian flashpoint and has become



a delicate fault line in the US-China rivalry.

The Philippine coast guard invited a small group of journalists, including two from The Associated Press, to join its ships that secured the supply boats as part of a new strategy aimed at exposing China's increasingly aggressive actions in the South China

Sea, which Beijing claims virtually in its entirety.

One Chinese coast guard ship came as close as 46 meters as it crossed the bow of BRP Cabra to block the Philippine coast guard ship, which maneuvered fast to avoid a collision, said a coast guard officer onboard the Cabra who could not be named

because of official policy.

The Cabra and another coast guard ship, the BRP Sindangan, were forced to stop, surrounded by four Chinese coast guard ships and four suspected militia vessels, as the two boats delivered supplies to the Filipino forces at Second Thomas Shoal, more than 7 kilometers away.

All the Philippine vessels sailed away without further incident after the supplies and a fresh crew of Filipino sailors were delivered to the military outpost on a long-marooned Philippine navy ship at the shoal.

"We're happy that the resupply mission succeeded despite all the dangerous blockings and other actions," Cmdr. Emmanuel Dangate of the Cabra told AP.

Coast Guard spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela condemned "the Chinese coast guard blockade and other perilous maneuvers as a violation of international regulations aimed at avoiding sea collisions." The coast guard would provide a report to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila for a possible diplomatic protest against China, he said.

Chinese officials at the embassy in Manila did not immediately comment on the encounter. When asked about the deployment of the Navy plane, U.S. Em-

bassy spokesperson Kanishka Gangopadhyay in Manila said he could not provide "mission specifics." "What I can say is that all of our military activities in the Philippines are conducted in full coordination with our Philippine allies," he said.

The United States lays no claim to the South China Sea but has declared that freedom of navigation and flight and peacefully resolving disputes are in its national interest.

It was not immediately clear why the U.S. Navy deployed the surveillance plane that flew for more than three hours overhead as the Chinese ships blocked and shadowed the Philippine vessels off Second Thomas Shoal. But Filipino security officials have said they have received intelligence information and surveillance images taken in the disputed waters from their American and other foreign counterparts in the past as part of security cooperation. **MDT/AP**

ASHOK SHARMA & KRUTIKA PATHI, NEW DELHI

SPACE

India lands a spacecraft near the moon's south pole, a world first

INDIA yesterday made history as it became the first country in the world to land a spacecraft near the moon's south pole, an uncharted territory that scientists believe could hold vital reserves of frozen water, and the fourth country to achieve a moon landing.

A lander with a rover inside touched down on the lunar surface at 6:04 local time, sparking cheers and applause among the space scientists watching in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru. After a failed attempt in 2019, India now joins the United States, the Soviet Union and China in reaching this milestone.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi watched the historic landing from South Africa, where he is participating in the BRICS nations summit. "India is now on the moon. India has reached the south pole of the moon — no other country has achieved that. We are witnessing history," Modi said as he waved the Indian tricolor flag.

S. Somnath, chairman of the state-run Indian Space Research Organization, or ISRO, said the rover will slide down a flap from the lander within hours or a day and conduct experiments, including an analysis of the mineral composition of the lunar surface.

The mission is expected to remain functional for two weeks, he said. He also said India would next attempt a manned lunar mission.

India's successful landing comes just days after Russia's Luna-25, which was aiming for the same lunar region, spun into an uncontrolled orbit and crashed. It would



have been the first successful Russian lunar landing after a gap of 47 years. Russia's head of the state-controlled space corporation Roscosmos attributed the failure to the lack of expertise due to the long break in lunar research that followed the last Soviet mission to the moon in 1976.

Excited and anxious, people

across India, home to the world's largest population, crowded around televisions in offices, shops, restaurants and homes. Thousands prayed Tuesday for the success of the mission with oil lamps on the river banks, temples and religious places, including the holy city of Varanasi in northern India.

After the landing, congratulations poured in from around the world, cementing India's emergence as a modern space power.

"Your success will power the imagination and light the future of people around the world," the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs

posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"Incredible!" European Space Agency's director general Josef Aschbacher tweeted. "I am thoroughly impressed."

NASA's former science mission chief, Thomas Zurbuchen, who now works at ETH Zurich, a public research university in Switzerland where he is leading its space initiative, said he felt proud of the achievement.

India's Chandrayaan-3 — "moon craft" in Sanskrit — took off from a launchpad in Sriharikota in southern India on July 14. Its landing marks a significant step forward for the nation's progress in space exploration, ISRO said in a statement earlier.

Many countries and private companies are interested in the south pole region because permanently shadowed craters may hold frozen water that could help future astronaut missions.

The six-wheeled lander and rover module of Chandrayaan-3 is configured with payloads that would provide data to the scientific community on the properties of lunar soil and rocks, including chemical and elemental compositions.

India's previous attempt to land a robotic spacecraft near the moon's little-explored south pole ended in failure in 2019. **MDT/AP**

THE leader of one of Thailand's best-known property empires has been selected prime minister just nine months after joining a political party that champions the poor.

Parliament confirmed Srettha Thavisin on Tuesday, ending months of political uncertainty following May elections. The 61-year-old political newcomer, who exudes the confidence of a seasoned business tycoon, will lead the Pheu Thai party's push to stimulate the economy and bridge one of the world's worst inequality gaps.

"I'm doing this because I want to improve the country and the economy," Srettha wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, days ahead of the vote. "I'd like to emphasize again. My enemy is people's poverty and inequality. My goal is a better livelihood for all Thai people."

THAILAND

New leader is a wealthy property developer who didn't hide his political views



Pheu Thai political party's Srettha Thavisin reacts as he attends a press conference after Thailand's parliament voted in favor of his prime ministerial candidacy

Srettha announced last November that he had joined Pheu Thai, the latest in a string of parties associated with popular but divisive former Prime Minister

Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by a military coup in 2006. It was Srettha's first official step into politics.

Hours before Tuesday's

parliamentary vote, Thaksin returned to Thailand from years of self-imposed exile and began serving an eight-year prison sentence on corruption charges he has dismissed as politically motivated. There has been widespread speculation that Srettha's expected appointment was related to Thaksin's return and that it might help shorten his jail time.

Early this year, Srettha stepped down as CEO and president of his family's company, Sansiri, one of Thailand's largest property developers with assets worth over 100 billion baht (\$2.9 billion). He also

transferred all of his shares, reportedly valued at more than 1.2 billion baht (\$35 million), in the company to his daughter.

The recipient of an MBA from Claremont Graduate University in the U.S., Srettha led Sansiri to a record profit of over 4 billion baht (\$117 million) in 2022.

After Pheu Thai confirmed it would nominate him as prime minister, Srettha and Sansiri battled a series of accusations of tax evasion and money laundering. The company and its former boss denied any wrongdoing.

Pheu Thai finished second in the May elections

but was able to assemble an 11-party coalition — including two pro-military parties affiliated with outgoing Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha — with enough parliamentary votes to approve Srettha.

Srettha was born into a wealthy family, and there has been skepticism over his ability to connect with Pheu Thai's main voters in the country's relatively poor, rural north. After joining the party, he appeared at many campaign stops targeting the working class, including residents of Bangkok's biggest slum community and rural farmers. **MDT/AP**

SOUTH AFRICA

Putin denounces sanctions on Russia during his speech from a distance for BRICS summit

GERALD IMRAY &
MOGOMOTSI MAGOME,
JOHANNESBURG

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin took multiple shots at the West on the opening day of an economic summit in South Africa, using a prerecorded speech that was aired on giant screens yesterday [Macau time] to rail at what he called “illegitimate sanctions” on his country and threaten to cut off Ukraine’s grain exports permanently.

Putin, the subject of an International Criminal Court arrest warrant related to the war in Ukraine, did not travel to Johannesburg for the summit of the BRICS group of emerging economies. Instead, he plans to participate remotely in the three-day meeting of the bloc that encompasses Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

His 17-minute speech recorded in advance centered on the war in Ukraine and Russia’s relationship with the West — even though South African officials had said East-West frictions should not dominate the first in-person BRICS summit since before the COVID-19 pandemic and hoped to guide the conversation away from the deteriorating geopolitical climate.

Sitting at a desk with a white notebook in front of him and a Russian flag behind, Putin said a wartime deal to facilitate Ukrainian grain shipments that is critical for the world’s food supply would not resume until his conditions — the easing of restrictions on Russian food and agricultural products — are met.

The West’s attempts to punish and isolate Russia financially for sending troops into Ukraine are an “illegitimate sanctions practice and illegal freezing of assets of sovereign states, which essentially amounts to them trampling upon all the basic norms and rules of free trade,” the Russian leader asserted.



Moscow pulled out of the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July and stepped up drone and missile attacks on the city of Odesa in southern Ukraine, home to one of the ports the controlled passage agreement covered.

The initiative was credited with helping reduce soaring prices of wheat, vegetable oil and other global food commodities. Putin maintained that even with Russian exports of grain and fertilizer being “deliberately obstructed,” his country has “the capacity to replace Ukraine in grain, both commercially and in free aid to needy countries,” according to an official translation of his speech at the summit.

The United States and other Western nations have not directly targeted Russian agricultural exports, but moves to restrict Russia’s access to international financial payment systems under some sanctions have made it difficult for the country to get food, fertilizer and other products to market.

“With these facts in mind, since July 18 we have refused to extend the so-called deal,” Putin said. “We will be ready to get back to it, but only if all the obligations to the Russian side are truly fulfilled.”

Chinese President Xi Jinping also brought an air of confrontation to the Johannesburg summit, saying in a

speech read on his behalf by a Chinese government minister minutes after Putin’s address that “some country, obsessed with maintaining its hegemony, has gone out of its way to cripple the emerging markets and developing countries.”

“Whoever is developing fast becomes its target of containment. Whoever is catching up, becomes its target of obstructions,” Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao said while delivering Xi’s speech.

It was a clear reference to the United States and the growing economic friction between the U.S. and China.

Xi is in South Africa for the summit and met with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa Tuesday. He didn’t attend the opening-day business forum where the other three BRICS leaders gave their addresses in person and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov represented his country. No reason was given for the Chinese leader’s absence.

However, Xi, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ramaphosa were all expected to meet over dinner at a luxury estate in suburban Johannesburg. Putin also planned to take part virtually, officials said.

The five BRICS countries are already home to 40% of

the world’s population and responsible for more than 30% of global economic output, and more than 20 nations have applied to join, according to South African officials, including Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi planned to attend the summit.

Overall, around 1,200 delegates from the five BRICS nations and dozens of other developing countries are in South Africa’s biggest city, and more than 40 heads of state were expected to take part in some of the summit meetings, according to Ramaphosa.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres also was expected to attend.

While summit host South Africa has pushed back at characterizations that BRICS is taking more of an anti-West turn under Russian and Chinese influence, it’s clearly a forum for growing discontent in the developing world with global institutions.

That unhappiness has been directed at bodies seen as Western-led, including the U.N., the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which many countries in the Global South feel do not serve their interests. MDT/AP

this day in history

1993 MICHAEL JACKSON ACCUSED OF CHILD ABUSE



Police in Los Angeles are investigating allegations of child abuse made against singer Michael Jackson.

They have refused to give details but it has emerged that two of Mr Jackson’s homes were searched at the weekend following allegations of child abuse.

It is reported that the father of one boy befriended by Mr Jackson has alleged the singer seduced the child and performed sex acts with him.

Detectives are said to have interviewed the boy and other youngsters who visited Mr Jackson’s Neverland ranch in Santa Barbara.

They include 12-year old actor Macaulay Culkin, star of the Home Alone films.

The singer who is currently on tour in Thailand is aware of the allegations and issued a statement through his lawyer, Harold Weitzman.

“I am confident the police department will conduct a fair and thorough investigation and that the result will demonstrate that there was no wrong doing on my part,” Mr Weitzman read.

The singer’s security adviser, Anthony Pellicano, has said the allegation is part of a \$20m extortion plot.

Around 30 such blackmail attempts were made against Mr Jackson each year, Mr Pellicano added.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Michael Jackson vehemently denied the accusations - made by the father of 13-year old Jordie Chandler - and he was never charged. A civil case was settled out of court in early 1994 when he paid Jordie Chandler a reported \$20m (£14m).

Three years later Jordie Chandler’s account of the relationship was detailed in a book by a journalist, Victor M Gutierrez.

The book was said to be based on a diary the boy had kept at the time and included details of alleged sexual encounters between the pair.

In 1996 Jordie Chandler’s father, Evan, started a claim for around \$60m (£38.5m) from the singer claiming Michael Jackson had breached an agreement never to discuss the case.

In 1999 a court ruled in Michael Jackson’s favour and threw out the lawsuit.

Then in November 2003, he was arrested and charged with child abuse after British journalist Martin Bashir had made a documentary in which Jackson admitted sharing his bed with children.

Dubbed the trial of the century, it lasted four months and ended in June 2005 when Michael Jackson was cleared of all charges.

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Stubborn about making changes around your home. Keep a lookout for any individuals eager to confront you with unsavory situations.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

Don't jump the gun; you may find yourself getting angry at the wrong person. You will enjoy travel and getting together with peers.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

Things at work have been moving quickly and you may be feeling a little uncertain about the changes taking place. Pamper yourself; you deserve it.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

Don't let other people meddle in your private affairs. Concentrate on work or make changes to yourself. Do something that will be stimulating and creative.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

You need to spend some time getting to know this person all over again. Don't depend on coworkers to help; they may only hold you back.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Ask family members for help and you will be able to complete the projects more quickly. Put your energy into learning new skills or picking up valuable information.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Too many opportunities and too many changes going on. You don't like confrontations at the best of times; however, you may find them difficult to avoid.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Don't forget that you've only heard one side of the story. Don't try to hide your true feelings from your mate. You may feel that someone at work is holding you back.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Look into joining groups that can give you hands-on advice about business. Avoid lending or borrowing. Your boss may not be in the best of moods today.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

A residential move may be necessary to get a better job. Females may put demands or added responsibilities on you. You must try to lay your cards on the table.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

Do something together and you'll be surprised how sweet a deal you can make. Strong willpower will come to your rescue. You may divulge private information without realizing it today.



PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Your home environment appears to be a little shaky. Try to keep to yourself; work diligently on domestic chores and responsibilities. Investments may be misrepresented today.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



SUDOKU

EASY

Sudoku grid for EASY level

EASY+

Sudoku grid for EASY+ level

MEDIUM

Sudoku grid for MEDIUM level

HARD

Sudoku grid for HARD level

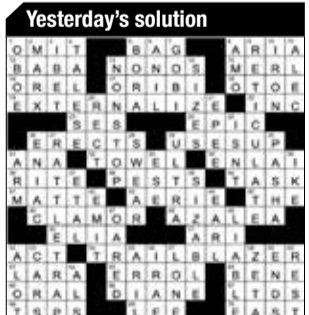
WEATHER

Weather forecast table with columns for MIN, MAX, and CONDITION for various cities in China and the World.

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Sun-dried brick; 6- Salamander; 10- Latin lesson word; 14- Cleave; 15- Impression; 16- And ___ goes; 17- Bendable twig, usually of a willow tree; 18- Pitchfork-shaped letters; 19- As to; 20- Abductors; 22- Pole; 23- Blab; 24- That, in Tijuana; 26- Big blaze; 30- Bondage; 34- Reasoning; 35- Take note of; 36- Monetary unit of Romania; 37- Yemen neighbor; 38- Swung around; 40- Subsidized; 41- Bee; Prefix; 42- Kind of rock; 43- Brief brawl; 44- Notion; 46- Extremely variable; 48- Classical starter; 49- Close with force; 50- Wife of a rajah; 53- Profession; 59- Exclamation to express sorrow; 60- ___-do-well; 61- Mr. Moto portrayer; 62- Relocate; 63- Dame ___ Everage; 64- One of Chekhov's "Three Sisters"; 65- Underworld river; 66- Spool; 67- Goose genus;

DOWN 1- "Dilbert" intern; 2- Lucie's father; 3- "Ars Amatoria" poet; 4- "It's ___ real"; 5- Unpredictable; 6- Teat; 7- Ford flop; 8- Small dam; 9- Like a fez; 10- "I, Robot" author; 11- ___ Lisa; 12- Melodies; 13- Editorial notation; 21- ___ capita; 25- Melancholic; 26- Puff up; 27- Pizazz; 28- Marsh of mystery; 29- Fish appendage; 30- Witness; 31- Overjoy; 32- Oscar de la ___; 33- Klondike territory; 35- 1963 Paul Newman film; 38- Sailing vessel; 39- Blotto; 40- A collection of articles; 42- Word that can succeed old, ice and bronze; 43- East African nation; 45- Like some salons; 46- Involving more than one; 47- Blame; 49- View; 50- Super Bowl XXXIV champs; 51- Tons; 52- Fleet; 54- Sign over; 55- Undecided; 56- Coloured part of the eye; 57- Caen's river; 58- At hand;



USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

- Emergency calls 999
Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
Fire department 28 572 222
Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
PJ (Open line) 993
Telephone - Report 1000
PJ (Picket) 28 557 775
Electricity - Report 28 339 922
PSP 28 573 333
Macau Daily Times 28 716 081
Customs 28 559 944
S. J. Hospital 28 313 731
Kiang Wu Hospital 28 371 333
Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) 28326 300
IAM 28 387 333
Tourism 28 333 000
Airport 59 888 88



Advertisement for 'BUY & RENT!' with contact information for jml property.

Advertisement for 'CONTACT US & SEIZE THIS OPPORTUNITY!' with contact information for jml property.

Advertisement for 'Kok Wui' property listing: HKD 7,800/mth 2 bed 1 bath.

Advertisement for 'Va Fat' property listing: HKD 3,980,000 2 bed 1 bath.

Advertisement for 'Supreme Flower City' property listing: HKD 22,000/mth 4 bed 3 bath.

Sands China brings three local artists to international stage for Art Macao 2023

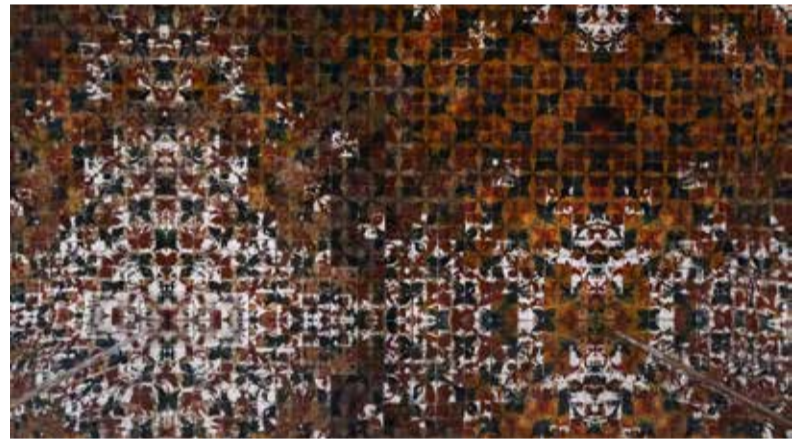


Sands China Ltd. is presenting "Behind the Forms: Aesthetics of Contemporary Art – Trio Exhibition by Lei Ieng Wai, Leong Chi Mou and Lai Sio Kit," a collateral exhibition staged in support of Art Macao: Macao International Art Biennale 2023.

Behind the Forms showcases artwork from three young local artists, providing a platform for promoting extensive exchange and cooperation among local and international art talent. Through their different creative techniques, artists Lei Ieng Wai, Leong Chi Mou and Lai Sio Kit demonstrate their own understandings of various topics around Macau's economic development – spectrum, data texture, belief and value.

Dr. Wilfred Wong, president of Sands China Ltd., said: "We are pleased to facilitate artistic exchange between local and international artists through our support to Art Macao, where Macau's young artists can learn from the experience of established art maestros, thereby setting foot onto the international stage."

Behind the Forms is available for viewing 11 a.m.-7 p.m. daily, Aug. 9-Oct. 15 at Sands Gallery, on the 6th floor of The Grand Suites at Four Seasons.



BASEBALL

Taiwan looks tough at Little League World Series with star Fan Chen-Jun leading the way

MAX RALPH

TAIWAN'S players put the finishing touches on a 10-0 mercy rule win over Japan, then marched to the oversized Little League World Series bracket between Volunteer and Lamade stadiums.

They stamped their name in the next round, then danced and cheered with family and friends for a good 20 minutes.

Kuei-Shan Little League from Taoyuan, Taiwan, has dominated its first two games of the tournament and it has done so in style.

The team pitched a perfect game and cruised past Canada 6-0 last Thursday and toppled Japan, annually contending for a championship since the late '90s, on Monday with a no-hitter. That's 16 runs for Taiwan and no hits for its opponents.



Taiwan starting pitcher Fan Chen-Jun delivers against Japan during the first inning of a baseball game at the Little League World Series tournament

The Taiwan region, which won 17 Little League World Series titles between 1969 and 1996, could be returning to form. Taiwan has gotten offensive contributions up and down its lineup, and its pitching has completely shut down oppo-

sing batters so far.

"Preparing for Japan, we know they are basically the empire for many series. We always prepared to have a very hard competition today," manager Lee Cheng-Ta said following Monday's win. "In fact,

I prepared three or five pitchers. It just happened that we got lucky that their pitcher got nervous, so we were able to finish early today."

Taiwan also boasts Fan Chen-Jun, a 12-year-old throwing 80 mph fastballs with a devastating slider. The reaction time required from a Little League hitter on an 80 mph pitch is about the same needed from an MLB hitter to handle a pitch well over 100 mph.

Oh, and he has yet to allow a hit in 6 2/3 innings with 15 strikeouts. He was perfect against Canada and allowed a walk and a hit by pitch to Japan.

And one more thing, he hit a home run against Canada and was intentionally walked against Japan.

Fan has been the unquestioned star of the tournament thus far and drew quick comparisons to MLB's two-way superstar Shohei Ohtani.

He's been casual about his per-

formances, saying he didn't even realize he threw three more no-hit innings against Japan until seeing the final box score.

Lee said he found Fan two years ago and saw more athletic ability than he "had ever seen," thinking he had potential as a baseball player.

That was a safe bet.

"He has the speed, he has the coordination, he has the jumping ability," Lee said. "I wish him to be safe and not to get injured. He has a lot of future to come in his baseball career."

Fan threw 51 pitches Monday, meaning he's not available to pitch again in today's [Macau time] matchup against Curacao under pitch limits. That's OK, says Lee, because he prepared even more pitchers to throw against Japan expecting the game would be much closer.

Lee named Liu You-An and Hsu Shao-Chieh as the two he would have thrown against Japan, as well as three more unnamed who were "in the pipeline." Neither one has pitched yet in the tournament.

However, the three pitchers not named Fan used by Taiwan thus far have also combined for 3 1/3 innings of perfect baseball. Chiu Tse-Wei and Cai Yuan-Ho finished the combined perfect game against Canada, the first one in the Little League World Series since 2017. **MDT/AP**

AD

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FOOTBALL | BASKETBALL | DAILY TRAININGS

OPINION

The Conversation

Meher Bhatia, The Conversation

NAVIGATING THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN AI, AUTOMATION AND RELIGION

In an era marked by rapid technological advancement, we are seeing everything from artificial intelligence to robots slowly seep into our everyday lives. But now, this technology is increasingly making inroads into a realm that has long been uniquely human: religion.

From the creation of ChatGPT sermons to robots performing sacred Hindu rituals, the once-clearer boundaries between faith and technology are blurring.

As one of the most prominent religious figures in the world, Jesus has been continually reinterpreted to fit the norms and needs of each new historical context, from Cristo Negro or "Black Christ" to being depicted as a Hindu mystic.

But now the prophet is on Twitch, a video live-streaming platform. And it's all thanks to an AI chatbot.

Presented as a bearded white man wearing a brown hood, "AI Jesus" is available 24/7 on his Twitch channel "ask_Jesus" and is able to interact with users who can ask him anything from deep religious-in-nature questions to lighthearted inquiries.

AI Jesus represents one of the newest examples in the growing field of AI spirituality, noted Boston College theology faculty member Joseph L. Kimmel, and may help scholars better understand how human spirituality is being actively shaped by the influence of AI.

A unique intersection of religion and robotic technology has emerged with the introduction of robots performing Hindu rituals in South Asia. While some have welcomed the technological inclusion, others express worries about the future that ritual automation could lead to.

Many believe that the growth of robots within Hindu practices could lead to an increase in people leaving the religion, and question the use of robots to embody religious and divine figures.

But there is another concern: whether robots could eventually replace Hindu worshippers. Automated robots would be able to perform rituals without a single error. This is significant because religions like Hinduism and Buddhism emphasize the correct execution of rituals and ceremonies as a means to connect with the divine rather than emphasizing correct belief.

It's a concept referred to as orthopraxy, according to Wellesley College anthropology lecturer Holly Walters. "In short, the robot can do your religion better than you can because robots, unlike people, are spiritually incorruptible," she explained. "Modern robotics might then feel like a particular kind of cultural paradox, where the best kind of religion is the one that eventually involves no humans at all."

According to College of the Holy Cross religious studies scholar Joanne M. Pierce, preaching has always been considered a human activity grounded in faith. But what happens when that practice is taken over by an AI chatbot?

In June 2023, hundreds of Lutherans gathered in Bavaria, Germany, for a service designed and delivered by ChatGPT. But many are cautious about using AI to conduct these religious practices.

In their sermons, preachers not only offer advice, but "speak out of personal reflection in a way that will inspire the members of the congregation, not just please them," Pierce said. "It must also be shaped by an awareness of the needs and lived experience of the worshiping community in the pews."

For the time being, it seems as though the inability to understand the human experience is AI's biggest flaw within the preaching sphere.

Gen. Sergei Surovikin, a former commander of Russia's forces in Ukraine who was linked to the leader of a brief armed rebellion, has been dismissed as chief of the air force, Russian state media reported yesterday after weeks of uncertainty about his fate.

Surovikin has not been seen in public since June 23-24, when Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner mercenary group, sent his men to march toward Moscow. In a video released during the uprising, Surovikin — who was believed to have close ties to Prigozhin — had urged him to pull the mercenaries back.

The Wagner uprising posed the most serious challenge to Presi-

dent Vladimir Putin's 23-year rule and reports circulated that Surovikin had known about it in advance. Prigozhin called off the rebellion short of reaching Moscow after he said he wanted to avoid bloodshed.

Surovikin's absence has been one of several enduring mysteries surrounding the rebellion. During his absence, Russian media have speculated about Surovikin's whereabouts, with some claiming he had been detained, but his daughter told the Russian social media channel Baza in late June that her father had not been arrested.

AP PHOTO



AP PHOTO



Syria Angry protesters raided the local offices of the ruling Baath party in a southern Syrian province yesterday, as protests intensified against the country's government during a severe economic and financial crisis battering the war-torn country. Opposition activists said protesters also partially blocked a highway that links the Druze-majority Sweida province to the capital Damascus in anti-government rallies that broke out Tuesday night.

AP PHOTO



Russia, Ukraine traded drone attacks yesterday, officials said, with Kyiv apparently targeting Moscow again and the Kremlin's forces launching another bombardment of Ukrainian grain storage depots in what have recently become signature tactics in the almost 18-month war. A three-hour nighttime Russian drone attack in Ukraine's southern Odesa region overnight Tuesday caused a blaze at grain facilities, Odesa Regional Military Administration Head Oleh Kiper wrote on the Telegram messaging app.

AP PHOTO



Germany's Cabinet yesterday approved a plan to make it easier for transgender, intersex and nonbinary people to change their name and gender in official documents, legislation that the justice minister said aims to make life easier for "a small group for which it has great significance." The legislation still needs approval by parliament. It is one of several reform plans that Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition of three socially liberal parties has embarked on, and has been criticized by the conservative opposition.

PROSECUTORS SAY WITNESS IN TRUMP'S CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS CASE RETRACTED FALSE TESTIMONY

ERIC TUCKER, WASHINGTON

A witness in the criminal case against Donald Trump over the hoarding of classified documents retracted "prior false testimony" after switching lawyers last month and provided new information that implicated the former president, the Justice Department said yesterday [Macau time].

The statements from the witness, a Trump staffer identified in court papers as the director of information technology at Mar-a-Lago, was presented to prosecutors weeks before special counsel Jack Smith secured an updated indictment accusing Trump and two others in a plot to delete surveillance video at the Florida property.

Prosecutors said in a court filing that the witness told a grand jury in Washington in March that he could not recall any conversations about the security footage

But in July, after being warned by prosecutors that he was a target of the investigation and after being advised that his lawyer might have a conflict of interest

because of his representation of others in the probe, the witness received a new attorney from the federal defender's office and provided the Justice Department with information that helped form the basis of the revised indictment against Trump, his valet Walt Nauta and a third defendant, Carlos De Oliveira, the court filing says.

Prosecutors described the witness interaction in a filing that seeks a hearing in Florida about potential conflicts of interest involving the defense lawyer, Stanley Woodward, who also represents Nauta. Woodward declined to comment to The Associated Press.

"The target letter to Trump Employee 4 crystallized a conflict of interest arising from Mr. Woodward's concurrent representation of Trump Employee 4 and Nauta," prosecutors wrote.

They added: "Advising Trump Employee 4 to correct his sworn testimony would result in testimony incriminating Mr. Woodward's other client, Nauta; but permitting Trump Employee 4's false testimony to stand uncorrected would leave Trump Employee 4 exposed to criminal charges

for perjury."

In the filing, the Justice Department also sought to explain its use of grand juries in both Washington and Florida, where charges were ultimately filed. U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon, a Florida judge presiding over the case, had earlier asked about the legal propriety of using grand juries in both districts.

Prosecutors said they continued using the Washington grand jury even after charges were filed in Florida for the express purpose of investigating potential false statements by witnesses in Washington. The Washington grand jury completed its term last week, they said.

A trial has been set for May 20, 2024, in the classified documents case. Trump has pleaded not guilty and denied any wrongdoing.

Trump is facing another prosecution by Smith, over efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, as well as a criminal case in Georgia over attempts to subvert that state's vote and another in New York in connection with hush money payments to a porn actor. **MDT/AP**