

CHINA

Flexible work policies push consumption

Provinces offer extended weekends in effort to boost consumer spending

By CANG WEI in Nanjing
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Local governments have been offering longer weekends or flexible working schedules in a bid to boost consumer spending, which has been deeply suppressed by the novel coronavirus pneumonia outbreak.

Nanjing, capital of Jiangsu province, is implementing a two-and-a-half-day weekend, a news conference held by the city government was told on Saturday.

The city aims to achieve sales of 1.6 trillion yuan (\$228 billion) in industries including catering, hotels and retail this year.

Cities in about a dozen provinces and municipalities — including Jiangxi, Zhejiang and Gansu — have rolled out similar measures to stimulate consumer spending in the wake of the pandemic disease, which has been dubbed COVID-19 by the World Health Organization.

Jiangxi issued a notice in March to implement a two-and-a-half-day weekend starting this month. It also offered half-price tickets to scenic spots and vouchers that can be used at hotels, restaurants and other venues to stimulate consumer demand.

Zhejiang has rolled out 16 measures to boost consumption, including a two and a half day weekend, vouchers and free tickets to scenic areas.

Kong Jing, who runs a hotel and a restaurant in Nanjing's Gaochun district, said she believes that measures granting people more time off will help bring in more customers.

"Tourists can only start a journey on Saturday and spend just one night in hotels with the regular two-day weekend," Kong said. "But now they can travel on Friday afternoon, go to other places and have more time to spend money."

"Many people working in industries such as tourism, restaurants and retail have suffered greatly during the COVID-19 outbreak. We became jobless for about two months, and a move to encourage consumption is urgent. Many of us are under great financial burden paying rent and workers' salaries."

The number of domestic tourists is expected to have fallen 56 percent year-on-year in the first quarter, with domestic tourism revenue down 69 percent, according to China Tourism Academy.

For the year, the number of domestic tourists is forecast to drop by 15.5 percent and related revenue by 20.6 percent, it said.

"We believe that together with other measures, the two-and-a-half-day weekend will help revive the economy curbed by the COVID-19 outbreak," said Wu Haijin, director of the Institute for Urban Studies at the Nanjing Academy of Social Sciences.

"But the government should put forward specific measures to avoid increasing the burdens of private companies, especially those small and medium-sized ones."

"The two-and-a-half-day weekend policy doesn't mean that all the workers don't need to work on Friday afternoon. The government departments should make proper working schedules and establish a job rotation system."

Making a splash



An enthusiast skis into a shallow pool at a resort in Urumqi, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, on Saturday. As the temperature rises and snow melts, people are bidding farewell to this winter's snow season. LIU XIN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Rescued from rubble



A trapped firefighter is rescued from the rubble of a market in Nandan county, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, on Sunday. A fire that broke out in the market at about 4:30 am was put out about three hours later. However, at 8:33 am, the market collapsed, trapping three firefighters who were investigating the site. Two were rescued, but the third, Wei Anwei, died. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

PLA Air Force's first female flight instructors begin teaching pilots

By ZHAO LEI
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The People's Liberation Army Air Force's first female flight instructors began training students late last month, the Air Force said in a statement released on Friday.

Several female fighter jet pilots were selected in August for flight instructor training at the Aviation University of the PLA Air Force, and they passed qualification tests in February, it said.

The instructors are graduates of the university and can fly basic trainer and advanced trainer planes as well as fighter jets.

They have been training flight students in CJ-6 basic trainer air-

craft since late March, the Air Force said.

The Chinese military enrolled its first female pilots in 1951, and about 580 female aviators in 10 generations have joined the Air Force since then. The first seven generations of female pilots only flew transport planes, but some have been selected to operate fighter jets since the eighth generation.

In the selection for the 10th generation in 2013, the Air Force selected 38 women who graduated from high school that year and sent them to its Aviation University. After five years of strict training, 17 graduated and qualified as fighter jet pilots.

Thirty-five female students are currently learning to fly at the Aviation University. After graduation,

some will become the 11th generation of female pilots.

Wu Peixin, a Beijing-based observer of military aviation, said the female instructors must have developed rich experience and skills in operating various types of planes to qualify as flight instructors — a truly demanding job.

"Generally speaking, women are more patient and more attentive to details, and these traits are useful in flight training," he said. "Moreover, female students are likely to feel more relaxed and encouraged when they are trained by female instructors."

Wu said the recruitment and deployment of more women in aviation units appeared to be a trend in the military.

Beijing announces resumption dates for some schools' new semesters

By DU JUAN
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The municipal education authorities in Beijing announced the dates for the start of the new school semester for some schools on Sunday, leaving only Hubei province still undecided on when to allow any students to return to school.

Students in their final year at junior high schools in Beijing are scheduled to return to school on May 11, while those attending senior high schools in the nation's capital will return on April 27, as the suspension of in-school education necessitated by the novel coronavirus pneumonia epidemic is lifted.

Beijing Municipal Education Commission spokesman Li Yi also told a news conference on Sunday afternoon that the college entrance examination in Beijing is scheduled to be held from July 7 to 10.

The entrance examination for

Beijing senior high schools will be held from July 17 to 19.

There are a number of specific requirements students and teachers must meet to be able to return to school.

Those who have not left the city or those who have stayed in Beijing for 14 successive days without symptoms can return to school.

Students who have left Beijing should be back in the city two weeks before the resumption of school and finish the 14-day home or integrated quarantine with a negative result in nucleic acid testing.

School staff members and teachers should be on duty 10 days before the resumption of classes to get prepared.

The schedule for the resumption of school for other grades, as well as kindergartens, colleges and special education schools, will be determined later, the commission said.

"Students in kindergartens are relatively weak in their ability to protect themselves, so they require more consideration, while the resumption of colleges means a big crowded population at campuses and dorms, which is not safe," it said in an explanatory document.

College students who study in Beijing have been told to stay in their hometowns.

In Beijing, senior students in junior high and senior high schools started online courses last month, while students in other grades and primary school students will start online courses on Monday.

Elsewhere, Guizhou province announced on Sunday that non-graduating classes in junior high and senior high schools will be back at school on April 28.

Students in their final year at junior high and senior high schools in Guizhou returned to schools in mid-March.

Quality of air, water improved last year, statistics say

By HOU LIQIANG
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China saw continuous environmental improvement last year, with reductions in airborne pollutants in major polluted cities and severely polluted surface water across the country, authorities said.

Cities above prefecture level experienced fairly good air quality on 82 percent of the days in 2019, up by almost three percentage points year-on-year, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

The bureau said such cities that have yet to see their PM2.5 particulate matter levels reach the national standard of 35 micrograms per cubic meter saw levels decrease by 2.4 percent.

China has a six-level air pollution system based on the air quality index. Air quality can be listed as fairly good with an index below 100.

The achievement was made thanks to the country's continuous efforts to upgrade major coal consumers, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment said.

By the end of last year, 86 percent of China's coal-fired power plants' installed capacity realized extra-low emissions. The emissions from over 780 million metric tons of crude steel production capacity in 23 provincial regions also reached extra-low levels.

For all rivers and lakes in the country, big or small, there should be buffer zones. Human activities should retreat from such zones as much as possible."

Zhang Bo, chief engineer at the Ministry of Ecology and Environment

Efforts were also made to help rural households shift from coal to clean energy to warm their homes during winter. Over 7 million rural households completed the shift in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei cluster in 2019, increasing the total number to 24 million.

The surface water across the country improved as well. While water with quality above Grade III, the third-highest of the country's five-tier surface water quality system, rose by 3.9 percentage points, water below Grade IV, the lowest quality, decreased by 3.3 percentage points.

The Yangtze River, the country's longest watercourse, witnessed even greater improvement in water quality, with that above Grade III up by 4.2 percentage points.

The ministry said it had managed to identify all wastewater drainage outlets in the Yangtze and its nine tributaries last year.

The top environmental watchdog registered 60,000 such outlets, over 30 times the number previously reported by local governments. It will roll out measures accordingly to intensify the governance of wastewater discharge.

Zhang Bo, the ministry's chief engineer, said, however, that environmental damage is still a common problem in many bodies of water across the country, and the ministry will beef up efforts to protect and restore the ecological system.

For example, bottom trawling for fish has been carried out in such an extreme manner in some regions that it has killed all aquatic plants in some water beds.

"The bottom of some lakes is a desert," Zhang said.

He said the ministry will set up buffer zones to prevent encroachment on water bodies.

"For all rivers and lakes in the country, big or small, there should be buffer zones," Zhang said. "Human activities should retreat from such zones as much as possible."

Scientists to seek more cooperation on virus data sharing

By ZHANG YANGFEI
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Chinese scientists have shared scientific data related to the novel coronavirus with the world and will seek more international cooperation, said Ma Juncai, director of the World Data Center for Microorganisms, which is based in Beijing.

Ma, who is also director of the National Microbiological Data Center at the Institute of Microbiology, a subsidiary of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, said that with the epidemic now entering a mitigation phase in China, they plan to hold seminars to communicate with international institutions and scientists to listen to their suggestions and understand their needs for data.

The institute is one of the Chinese scientific facilities that has published and updated novel coronavirus data in a timely manner since January.

Together with the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, it launched the Novel Coronavirus National Science and Technology Resource Service System on Jan 24, which unveiled data and the first microscopic pictures of a novel coronavirus strain extracted from patients.

"Information about the strain is very important. Only when the strain is isolated can development and research on vaccines and antiviral drugs be effectively carried out," Ma said, adding that as novel coronavirus pneumonia continues to affect the world, more similar information will be released.

"Therefore, we would like to develop a joint platform to put these data in a one-stop library for everyone to use," he said.

Ma said the resource service system mainly collects data garnered from independent domestic research, such as information about the strains and structure of

virus proteins. It is open to all users and free to download.

From Jan 24 to April 2, the website received about 8 million visits from 190,000 users in 139 countries and regions, with most visitors coming from the United States, Japan and Canada.

Qi Jianxun, a researcher at the Institute of Microbiology, uploaded his findings on the structure of a key protein of the novel coronavirus, which is important to the improvement of the serology test — one of the major testing methods for novel coronavirus — to the Worldwide Protein Data Bank on Feb 19 and the service system on Feb 20.

The service system released the findings the same day they were uploaded, while the data bank released them on March 18. The information has been downloaded more than 7,000 times, and the related paper was published in Cell, a top, peer-reviewed scientific jour-

nal focusing on life sciences, on Thursday.

"I submitted my data to the protein data bank and the data center at almost the same time. I didn't expect that the center would release my data and share it with world researchers in just six hours," Qi said, adding that this could help scientists crack the virus' pathogenic mechanism in time and lay the foundation for antibody and vaccine development.

Ma said, "The timely release of data shows our openness and transparency regarding information sharing, and the large number of downloads proves the data are useful."

In order to better serve world researchers, the institute released on Feb 18 the Global Coronavirus Data Sharing and Analysis System, which pools 3,198 genomes of coronavirus — including the one responsible for novel coronavirus pneumonia — 33,202 sequences

and 30,981 strains. It also reports where the data was collected.

In addition, the system provides tools to analyze and compare different coronaviruses, which can help researchers better trace the virus' mutation.

The Chinese Academy of Sciences also launched on March 31 the COVID-19 Pneumonia Scientific Literature Sharing Platform, which has collected 68 papers in Chinese and 62 papers in English written by Chinese researchers and will provide an important reference for coronavirus research.

"During the epidemic, we mainly published and shared China's microbiological scientific data via websites," said Qian Wei, head of the institute. "For upcoming challenges, we will cooperate with international organizations, microbiological research institutions and scientists to develop a big data platform to provide support for world health."