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Interview: China at 75 -- three features of its historic development, says Kuhn

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Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of the Kuhn Foundation, speaks during an interview with Xinhua in New York, the United States, Sept. 17, 2023. (Xinhua/Wu Xiaoling)

"Standards of living, the rule of law, and science and technology" are "three core features" of China's historic development in its 75-year journey from one of the world's poorest countries to a global economic powerhouse, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of the U.S. Kuhn Foundation, told Xinhua.

by Xinhua writer Yang Shilong

NEW YORK, Oct. 7 (Xinhua) -- "Standards of living, the rule of law, and science and technology" are "three core features" of China's historic development in its 75-year journey from one of the world's poorest countries to a global economic powerhouse, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of the U.S. Kuhn Foundation, told Xinhua in an interview.

Reflecting on his first visit to China in January 1989, he said, "I suspected then that China's economics, politics, science, culture, and history would eventually come to matter a great deal to the world. What I did not suspect then was how soon it would happen and how much China would come to matter to me personally."

Kuhn was awarded the China Reform Friendship Medal by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Dec. 18, 2018, recognizing his contribution to the understanding of China in all its richness, achievements, complexities and challenges.

RISING STANDARDS OF LIVING

Central to China's rise has been the astonishing increase in its standard of living for 1.4 billion people, said Kuhn.

In 1978, China was among the poorest in the world. From that year to 2023, the country's disposable personal income had risen to nearly 40,000 yuan (about 5,500 dollars), a 228-fold increase in yuan terms. China's current GDP accounts for almost 17 percent of the world's total.

China's economic growth has been extraordinary, maintaining an average annual growth rate of 8.9 percent between 1979 and 2023. "In the annals of human economics, no country has ever achieved such high-speed economic growth for such a long period," said Kuhn.

"In every category of living, the Chinese people have enjoyed spectacular improvement," said Kuhn. High-speed railways, which barely existed in 2008 in China, now stretch over 45,000 km, more than 70 percent of the world's total. Modern agriculture and biological breeding have provided food security. Healthcare and hospital reform and national medical insurance have substantially improved people's health. Green and low-carbon technologies have reduced pollution.



This aerial photo taken on Aug. 31, 2023 shows a bullet train running on the Yinpohe bridge of the Guiyang-Nanning high-speed railway in Dushan County, southwest China's Guizhou Province. (Xinhua/Liu Xu)

From 2013 to 2022, China added 130 million new urban jobs, an average of 13 million per year, and built the world's largest social security system, improving people's well-being and sense of security. As of September

2023, participants in basic pension, unemployment and work-related injury insurance nationwide number 1.06 billion, 240 million and 300 million, respectively. Social security cardholders number 1.377 billion, covering 97.4 percent of the population.

Kuhn said this growth, however, faces challenges. China's investment-led economy, particularly in infrastructure and property construction, is now experiencing a slowdown. In 2023, fixed capital formation still accounted for more than 40 percent of GDP, a level that is no longer sustainable. To address this, China is pivoting towards "high-quality development," emphasizing innovation and science and technology as the future drivers of growth, Kuhn said.

RULE OF LAW

China's governance has evolved alongside its economic transformation, noted Kuhn, highlighting President Xi's commitment to the rule of law as a crucial element of China's modernization.

Under Xi's leadership, judicial reforms have aimed to curb corruption and enhance transparency in the legal system.

One significant reform has been the transfer of the administration of local courts from city and county officials to provincial authorities, which has reduced interference in the legal process.

Today, the country's courts are promoting innovation in their judicial models in handling civil and administrative cases. By the end of 2022, Internet courts had accepted 429,000 Internet cases, exploring and piloting "online trial of online cases," a one-stop, multi-dispute resolution and litigation service system.

China's judgment documents network is the world's largest public website for judgment documents; it is updated in real-time, putting judicial cases

under the public spotlight and enhancing the quality and efficiency of legal supervision.

In 2022, an average of 54,000 disputes were mediated online every working day, with 75 disputes resolved every minute before litigation. Kuhn pointed out that despite these advances, ongoing challenges remain in ensuring that the rule of law is systematically applied at all levels of governance.

Xi's leadership stresses that while the Party remains central, officials must now strictly adhere to legal standards. Corrupt officials, including judges, face prosecution even after retirement, underscoring a commitment to accountability, said Kuhn.

LEADER IN SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

China's future, according to Kuhn, lies in becoming a global leader in science and technology.

Innovation has been made the cornerstone of China's development strategy. In 2023, China's investment in research and development (R&D) exceeded 3.3 trillion yuan (over 450 billion dollars), the second-largest in the world. China's high-tech enterprises have grown from 49,000 in 2012 to 330,000 by 2021. In 2021, the total number of R&D personnel was 5.72 million person-years, ranking the first in the world. China's focus on "indigenous innovation" has already yielded results. In 2022, China granted nearly 800,000 patents, more than double the number awarded in the U.S. that year. China now ranks second globally in highly cited scientific papers and has risen to 11th place in the Global Innovation Index, up from 34th in 2012. In 2023, four Chinese regions ranked among the top 10 global technology clusters, with the Shenzhen-Hong Kong-Guangzhou cluster second only to Silicon Valley.

Kuhn also drew on China's breakthroughs in quantum technology, artificial intelligence, biomedicine, and new energy. He listed China's

Tiangong-2 space lab, Chang'e-6 retrieval of rocks from the moon's far side, the Jiaolong deep-sea manned submersible, the 500-meter radio telescope, and the C919 aircraft that has entered commercial service. China is now a world leader in new energy vehicles, lithium batteries, and photovoltaic modules.



This photo shows a view of the delivery ceremony of China's large passenger aircraft C919 at a manufacturing center of Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China, Ltd. (COMAC) in Shanghai, east China, Aug. 28, 2024. Air China and China Southern Airlines, two major airlines in China, both received their first C919 large passenger aircraft delivered by COMAC here Wednesday. (Xinhua/Fang Zhe)

However, Kuhn said China's technological rise has not been without hurdles. U.S.-led sanctions have targeted China's access to advanced technologies like semiconductors, AI, and quantum computing. Chinese science faces challenges, Kuhn said, "and to realize its potential, China's science must encourage critical thinking and creativity -- the former to challenge conventional wisdom and the latter to bring about breakthroughs."

"We also cannot duck the dark side of science," Kuhn added. "Scientific fraud, fabrication and plagiarism must continue to be extirpated."

Despite these obstacles, China remains committed to sharing its scientific achievements for the betterment of humanity, a stance that reflects the country's broader cultural and civilizational ideals, he said.

"Surely, scientific and technological innovation not only enhances China's competitiveness in traditional industries, but also injects impetus for developing new quality productive forces," said Kuhn.

Kuhn said that as the world watches China's continued rise, one thing is certain: the nation's impact on the global stage will only grow in the coming decades. ■

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<https://english.news.cn/20241008/79607bd8c7dc490fa8b290cfbf6c852f/c.html>

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http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2024-10/08/content_117470058.htm

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<https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202410/09/WS6705b85da3105c25b38ecd09.html>