

Initiative to raise quality of seeds, crops

Launch ceremony sees introduction of 35 varieties by 27 companies in Hainan

By CHEN BOWEN in Haikou
chenbowen@chinadaily.com.cn

China has introduced its first batch of certified seeds into the market, marking a key step in improving seed quality and boosting crop yields. The initiative aims to raise seed standards, enhance agricultural production and strengthen the country's seed industry.

At a launch ceremony in Sanya, Hainan province, on Saturday, the National Agro-Tech Extension and Service Center awarded certification to 27 seed companies, allowing 35 varieties of certified seeds to enter the market.

"Seed certification is a standardized quality assurance system that focuses on high-quality seeds and emphasizes process management. It involves certification bodies confirming and issuing certificates and labels to prove that a batch of seeds meets specified requirements," an official from the center said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The official added that seed certification is internationally recognized as a reliable method to ensure seed quality, serving as a "credit guarantee" for good seeds, a "health check" for seed companies and a "passport" for international trade.

In 2023, the State Administration for Market Regulation and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs issued guidelines to establish a unified national seed certification system. Two certification bodies were accredited in 2024, and the first group of seed certification inspectors was registered, officially putting the system into practice.

More than 10 million kilograms of

seeds from 35 varieties have been certified, according to the center. Test results show that certified seeds for crops such as corn, soybeans and rice have significantly higher germination rates and purity levels than non-certified seeds.

Certified corn seeds have shown a 4 percentage point increase in their germination rate and a 1.5 percentage point improvement in purity over single-seed sowing standards, while certified hybrid rice seeds have outperformed national standards by 8.6 and 2.9 percentage points, respectively.

Peng Xubing, general manager of Hubei Kangnong Seed Co, said the company, which specializes in research and production of corn, konjac (elephant yam) and Chinese medicinal plant seeds, plans to use the certification as an opportunity to accelerate its transformation into a modern seed enterprise integrating breeding, reproduction and promotion.

Starting Oct 1, newly revised mandatory seed quality standards will take effect, further raising seed quality requirements and standardizing labeling and usage instructions. These standards aim to enhance the quality criteria of some crop seeds, including purity and germination rate, for five cereal crops (rice, corn, wheat, sorghum, and millet) and four oilseed crops (rapeseed, sunflower, peanuts and linseed).

The new standards, which supplement the seed certification system, are expected to reinforce China's commitment to improving agricultural productivity and ensuring food security through advanced seed certification and quality control measures.

Shanghai to strengthen foundational AI research

By ZHOU WENTING in Shanghai
zhouwenting@chinadaily.com.cn

National legislators and political advisers from universities in Shanghai are urging a stronger focus on foundational artificial intelligence research to bolster the nation's capabilities in basic theories and original algorithm development for AI industrialization.

The calls for the change, made during the annual sessions of China's top legislature and advisory body known as the "two sessions" which were held in Beijing in March, emphasize the need to strengthen basic theoretical research in AI data science, improve top-level planning and coordination for key technology research, development and application innovation, and build high-quality data sets.

"Universities, especially the top-tier ones in Shanghai, should serve as the best source and research pioneer area for driving the innovation and development of AI technology," said Gu Xianglin, a National People's Congress deputy and a professor at Tongji University.

He cited the advantages of higher education institutions, including talent concentration, diverse disciplines, well-equipped research bases and international collaboration.

While acknowledging Shanghai's progress in AI industry scale, technology and enterprise numbers, legislators and advisers pointed to existing shortcomings.

Last year, Mei Bing, an NPC deputy and Party secretary of East China Normal University, led a research effort involving 37 NPC deputies in Shanghai to examine the AI Plus initiative and the development of new quality productive forces.

Their findings highlighted that China's research on basic AI theory and original algorithms remains relatively weak, and that there is a significant gap between China and leading foreign technology companies in theoretical exploration and large-scale AI model development.

In his Government Work Report at the National People's Congress on March 5, Premier Li Qiang pledged to advance the AI Plus initiative, integrating digital technology with manufacturing and market advantages and supporting the widespread application of large models.

He outlined plans to develop new-generation intelligent terminals and smart manufacturing equipment, including intelligent connected new energy vehicles, AI-enabled phones and computers, and intelligent robots.

NPC deputies said the government's focus on computing power and data deployment signals comprehensive support for AI industry development, driving the integration of AI into various industries and creating opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Fang Shouen, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Party secretary of Tongji University, described AI as a fundamental technology for socioeconomic development and industrial transformation, as well as a key area of global competition.

A World Economic Forum report projects a 40 percent increase in global demand for AI-related jobs by 2027. The McKinsey Global Institute predicts China's AI talent gap could reach 4 million by 2030.

"Therefore, cultivating a sufficient number of high-quality AI professionals with innovative capabilities is key to the successful implementation of the national strategy for AI development," Fang said.

Jin Li, an NPC deputy and president of Fudan University, said the institution has launched new AI education reforms, emphasizing integrated teaching and learning and creating an intelligent teaching environment.

"Our goal is to enable students not only to learn how to use tools, but also to master and transform them," he said.

Study trip



Russian students learn traditional Chinese painting techniques under the guidance of a teacher at Tianjin Foreign Studies University in Tianjin on Sunday. On that day, a group of 22 students from Russia embarked on a two-week in-depth study tour of Chinese language and culture. During their time in Tianjin, the students will not only participate in courses such as Chinese calligraphy, Chinese painting and tea art, but also visit famous landmarks. JIANG BAOCHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Yunnan coffee gaining intl recognition

By ZHENG ZHENG in Shanghai
zhengzheng@chinadaily.com.cn

For more than a decade, German entrepreneur Eric Baden has been working to elevate coffee from Yunnan province into the top tier of the global market, alongside renowned beans from Colombia and Ethiopia.

Baden, who runs Coffee Commune, a Shanghai-based brand, said he was particularly inspired by a recent comment from President



Eric Baden

Xi Jinping. During a visit to the Old Town of Lijiang in Yunnan on March 19, Xi was offered a cup of coffee and remarked that "Yunnan coffee represents China."

"It's a remarkable statement because coffee has long been considered a Western beverage and culture," Baden said. "But that is no longer true. Young Chinese consumers have embraced coffee just as

much as tea — some even prefer it."

Baden, 58, is widely known in China as "Coffee Laolin". Since founding Coffee Commune in 2016, he has worked with Yunnan farmers to develop specialty coffee — a category that was virtually nonexistent in the region before. By introducing advanced cultivation, processing and roasting techniques, he has helped growers transition from bulk production to premium beans.

His efforts have paid off. Coffee Commune won China's first international silver medal for its specialty Yunnan blend several years ago, and more awards have followed since small farms began developing their own high-quality brands.

"I've seen tremendous improvements in Yunnan coffee," Baden said. "The level of professionalism in growing and processing has transformed."

Public recognition of Yunnan coffee is also rising. When Coffee Commune opened its shop in Shanghai's Pudong district six years ago, customers primarily sought imported beans from Colombia or Ethiopia. Now, many specifically request Yunnan varieties.

"Consumers have become much

more knowledgeable about Yunnan coffee," Baden said. "They recognize the diversity of flavor profiles and are gaining confidence that it can rival Costa Rican, Colombian, or Kenyan coffee."

Yunnan produces more than 98 percent of China's coffee. Last year, the province exported 32,500 metric tons of coffee — a 358 percent increase from the previous year — reaching 29 countries and regions, including Germany and the United States, according to Yunnan customs.

"Everyone around the world, including in China, thinks of tea as China's beverage," Baden said. "But it's time to acknowledge that coffee also plays a major role here."

He said he has also noticed China's coffee culture expanding beyond younger generations.

"We see a lot of people in their 50s and 60s eager to learn about coffee and how to brew it at home," he said, referring to Coffee Commune's academy in Yunnan's Pu'er region, where courses are offered on coffee production and preparation.



Online
See more
by scanning
the code.

Artificial intelligence takes sex toy industry by storm

By QIU QUANLIN in Guangzhou
qiuquanlin@chinadaily.com.cn

The burgeoning development of artificial intelligence has found a sultry new frontier in the sex robot industry, as a Chinese company unveils a new series of realistic dolls designed to respond like humans.

Enhanced by open-source AI, the dolls can talk, identify and mimic emotions. Developed by WMdoll in Zhongshan, Guangdong province, the MetaBox series of robotic dolls have human-like qualities that the maker claims can fulfill both physical and psychological needs.

With the integration of AI, the company's MetaBox doll series even responds to tactile stimulation, allowing users to satisfy personal needs — even if it is just a rubber fantasy.

"Traditional adult dolls generally aim at fulfilling basic physical needs, but AI gives them emotional value," said Liu Jiangxia, founder of WMdoll in Zhongshan.

After testing with members of the public overseas in December, the initial batch of 200 units was released in North America, Japan and Europe. They quickly sold out at a price of \$1,600 to \$2,000 each. High-end models currently online are marked at around \$3,000.

That may be a bargain compared with the cost of a real human com-



We will continue exploring technological innovations in the sex doll industry, as we are aimed not only at satisfying physical needs but also the psychological needs of our users."

Liu Jiangxia, founder of WMdoll in Zhongshan, Guangdong province

panion. Dolls don't have physical or emotional needs, and they're entirely predictable. They won't argue. They don't require food. They don't have morning breath. Plus, unlike a human, you can store them in a closet.

Prices vary because of different custom configurations, including height and external attributes, such as skin type, Liu said.

Also, you pay more to get the full range of human qualities brought by AI, including a large language model, or LLM, for speech, the technology behind generative ser-

vices such as DeepSeek and ChatGPT.

"Users need to pay a subscription fee, starting at \$100 for the first year, if they want to experience all the AI interactive functions of the models tested," Liu said.

Demand from overseas continues to rise, with projected sales growth estimated at 30 percent year-on-year after the official release in April, he said.

"We are currently accelerating data iteration and making production capacity adjustments to meet the increased overseas demand," Liu said.

The series of dolls includes six female and two male models designed to represent six professions — secretary, doctor, nurse, teacher, police officer or businessperson. You get a choice of eight personalities and voices. The dolls currently support conversations in English, German, Japanese, Korean, French and Spanish.

"Their personalities are not gender-specific and can be customized based on the users' preferences," Liu said. With 32 wireless sensors inside, a doll can engage in multi-day conversations and respond to tactile stimulation.

Currently, the AI sex dolls are only available for sale in overseas markets, but they could be launched in the Chinese market very soon. The company is working closely with Chinese-language AI

service providers to develop a Chinese version of the innovative adult toys that will meet domestic demand, he said.

According to iiMedia Research, a global third-party data mining and analysis firm that specializes in industries of the new economy, China's adult toy market exceeded 130 billion yuan (\$17.88 billion) in 2023 and is expected to nearly double that by the end of the year.

When it was founded in 2010, WMdoll manufactured products made of soft and flexible thermoplastic elastomer, or TPE — a material commonly used for human body models. The company made a rapid transformation to focus on adult sex toys. With an eye on customer desires, it produced its first TPE dolls in 2012.

"Our customers were keen on buying TPE models of body parts that look and feel human. So we expanded into making TPE sex dolls," Liu said.

The company partnered with domestic AI humanoid robot provider Mind with Heart Robotics, a Shenzhen company, to produce dolls that have emotional facial expressions and physiological data linkages.

"We will continue exploring technological innovations in the sex doll industry, as we are aimed not only at satisfying physical needs but also the psychological needs of our users," Liu said.