

China leads robotics race

World's first humanoid half-marathon puts innovations to a challenging test

By CHENG YU
chengyu@chinadaily.com.cn

The world's first humanoid robot half-marathon, with 20 robots running alongside thousands of human participants, was held in Beijing on April 19, but it was just the starting gun for China's burgeoning robotics industry, according to executives and experts.

The half-marathon, despite some imperfect performances like an occasional stumble, proved that China's humanoid robots are moving from flashy laboratory demos to real-world scenarios. In the shadow of the United States' recent tariff hikes, China's advances in artificial intelligence and robotics may stand out as a potent counterstrike, they added.

In the 21-kilometer half-marathon, which tested the physical limits of even some human runners, six of the 20 robots managed to finish the race. Tiangong Ultra, standing 1.8 meters tall and weigh-

ing 55 kilograms, won the race with a time of 2 hours, 40 minutes and 42 seconds.

Xiong Youjun, CEO of the Beijing Humanoid Robot Innovation Center, the developer of Tiangong Ultra, said, "The goal wasn't just to cross the finish line, but to test key technologies through the rigors of a long-distance run, then improve technological breakthroughs, and finally, lay the groundwork for robots to enter factories and daily life services."

Xiong said the robots needed compact, heat-resistant joints, precise motion control and strong core algorithms to finish the race. The half-marathon also tested their stability, reliability, battery life and ability to handle complex terrain like slopes and turns.

Liang Liang, deputy director of the management committee of Beijing Economic-Technological Development Area, one of the organizers of the race, said: "The robot half-marathon, the world's first such race, marked a new starting gun for the whole industry. It



Tiangong Ultra, a humanoid robot developed by the Beijing Humanoid Robot Innovation Center, crosses the finish line during the Humanoid Robot Half Marathon in Beijing on April 19. The robot, which completed the run in 2 hours, 40 minutes and 42 seconds, won the race and became the world's first humanoid robot to finish a half-marathon. LI XIN / XINHUA

also sparked deeper public discussion around human-machine coexistence, raised awareness and will help accelerate the development of the robotics industry."

The event came as China accelerates its push to develop humanoid robots, having labeled them as a "strategic frontier" in 2023, when it also set a target of mass production and domestic supply chain security by 2027.

While US companies such as Boston Dynamics and Tesla have dominated headlines with viral demos

and futuristic visions, Chinese brands and companies are rapidly catching up — not just in manufacturing but also in mass-producing such robots and making them inexpensive for ordinary people.

For instance, Unitree Robotics, another leading robotics company, priced its G1 humanoid robots at 99,000 yuan (\$13,560). Such a price sets them apart from Tesla's Optimus, which is expected to cost between \$20,000 and \$30,000. The company said it is currently preparing for a globally livestreamed

humanoid robot boxing match.

According to a recent report by Leaderobot and nine other institutions, China is on track to produce more than 10,000 humanoid robots this year, accounting for more than half of global output and generating 8.24 billion yuan in sales revenue.

With costs falling and ecosystems maturing, the humanoid robot industry is poised to leap from pilot projects to large-scale commercialization. This could give the country a new economic growth engine, the report said.

Both sides of Taiwan Strait mark Mazu's birthday

Thousands join celebrations to mark genesis of goddess of the sea in Fujian province

By ZHANG YI and HU MEIDONG

A shared belief in Mazu, the revered goddess of the sea, drew thousands of people, including many from Taiwan, on April 20 to celebrate her birth in Fujian province, despite heightened cross-strait tensions.

Mazu, originally named Lin Mo, was born on Meizhou Island in Putian, Fujian, during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Revered for her miraculous ability to calm storms and rescue ships in distress, she became a symbol of protection for seafarers, leading to the construction of temples in her honor around the world.

Ma Jui-chun, a board member of the Xingang Fengtian Temple in Chiayi, Taiwan, said that more than 300 years ago, early settlers brought incense fire from the Meizhou temple across the Strait to Taiwan.

"They brought with them the spirit of pioneering and overcom-

ing challenges, but also a cultural bond that now unites both sides of the Strait with shared hometown and family affection," he said. "In Taiwan, every Mazu temple represents the roots of our ancestors."

When the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) ended, residents of Fujian crossed the Strait to settle in Taiwan. Facing a treacherous sea journey, they carried small statues of Mazu aboard their boats for protection, eventually establishing temples across the island.

Today, there are about 500 Mazu temples across Taiwan, and an estimated two-thirds of the island's population are believed to be devotees.

"Mazu is the source of people's inner peace and faith in Taiwan. She is not only a spiritual support but also very close to each believer, like a family member," said Chiu Yi, a political commentator from Taiwan.

"All Mazu temples originate from



A celebration honoring the 1,065th birthday of the sea goddess Mazu is held at a Mazu temple on Meizhou Island in Putian, Fujian province, on April 20. Representatives from Mazu temples and Mazu cultural groups at home and abroad, as well as Mazu devotees, participated in the event. CAI HAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

Meizhou Island," he said, adding that even though the current Taiwan authorities are promoting the removal of Chinese cultural ele-

ments, the connection between the two sides "cannot be separated".

Mazu's presence in Taiwan has been a cultural phenomenon. In

1997 and 2017, her statue from Meizhou caused a sensation when it traveled to the island for ritual patrols. Last month, two Mazu statues made headlines again when they were flown from Xiamen, Fujian, to Taiwan in designated seats on a plane to join this year's celebrations.

Even though the Taiwan authorities introduced "17 strategies" last month aimed at countering "perceived threats" from the mainland, including curbs on religious exchanges, many temples in Taiwan, including those in Changhua, Taichung and Hualien, joined the 1,065th birthday celebration for Mazu in Fujian through online platforms.

More than 130 Mazu temples and cultural organizations from about 25 countries across five continents took part in the ceremony.

Contact the writers at
zhangyi1@chinadaily.com.cn