

Chinese Equities - 2023 Outlook

First in, last out

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FLASH NOTE

SUMMARY

- The Chinese economy will likely rebound in 2023, as the government has pledged to prioritise growth and restore confidence after three years of ‘zero-covid policy’.
- Economic activity has shown initial signs of recovery since last December thanks to re-opening. We will likely see a revival in domestic consumption from the persistently muted levels of the past three years, partly offsetting the drag from slowing exports, while China’s property sector will likely stabilise on more policy support and improved household confidence.
- Although the accelerated re-opening process may mean a quicker economic than we previously expected, the strength of China’s recovery remains to be seen. Macro policy will likely continue to be supportive with additional rate cuts and government debt issuance—but the space for large-scale stimulus is limited.
- Several waves of negative events impacted sentiment towards Chinese equities from 2020 onwards, leading to a major bear market for offshore and onshore indices. However, the main negative drivers are rapidly fading, with the lifting of China’s zero-covid policy a major catalyst for the recent rebound.
- While valuations of Chinese equities (especially offshore) have sharply rebounded since last November, they remain relatively neutral (on a sector-adjusted basis in particular). We therefore see room for further expansion, if not an overshoot.
- Earnings revisions remain negative overall, but upward revisions in a rising number of consumer-related and other sectors bodes well and should further support market performance if it persists. We also note that earnings growth expectations in China are among the highest across emerging markets.
- Our preference goes towards offshore indices due to their higher consumer exposure, light positioning and still-low relative valuation premium vs A shares.
- We are raising our 2023 year-end target for the MSCI China to HKD 76, which implies a total return of 7% (in USD) based on current prices.

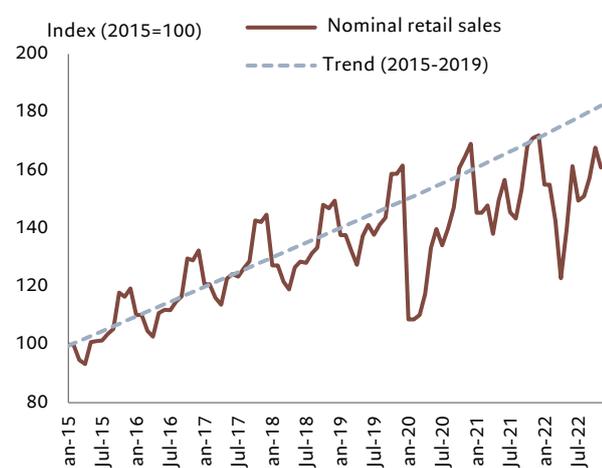
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ECONOMIC ACTIVITY TO RECOVER THANKS TO REOPENING

The Chinese government's abrupt turn from its zero-covid policy in December, and its doubling down on promoting growth set the stage for a stronger-than-expected economic rebound in 2023. Indeed, there have already been encouraging signs of a recovery. According to our estimates, economic activity in China was back to around 68% of its pre-pandemic level at the time of writing, up from an average of 50% in November when the country was under stringent covid restrictions.

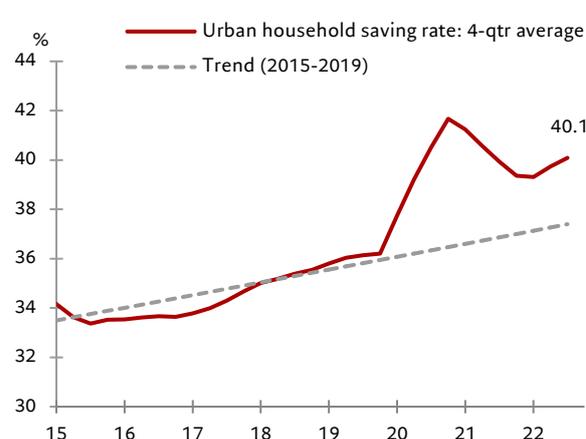
Since the pandemic started in early 2020, Chinese household consumption has remained persistently below its long-term trend (see *Chart 1*), while the savings rate has surged (see *Chart 2*). In the near term, we expect domestic demand to recover, partly offsetting the drag from weakening external demand. But the strength and sustainability of the domestic rebound remains to be seen as the labour market could remain soft until meaningful policy stimulus kicks in.

Chart 1: Chinese nominal retail sales



Source: Pictet WM & CIO Office & Macro Research, National Bureau of Statistics of China, as of 16 January 2023

Chart 2: Chinese household savings rate



Source: Pictet WM & CIO Office & Macro Research, National Bureau of Statistics of China, as of 16 January 2023

After a contraction of -10.0% in property investment and -53.4% in land acquisition in 2022, policy support will likely enable the property sector to stabilise. Housing demand may improve on the back of a recovery in household confidence and more stimulus measures. In Q3 2022, the weighted average mortgage interest rate in China hit 4.3%, its lowest point since 2009. That said, a major rebound in the Chinese property sector seems unlikely for structural reasons, as discussed in our [China 2023 Macro Outlook](#).

POLICIES WILL LIKELY STAY SUPPORTIVE, BUT NO LARGE-SCALE STIMULUS

We expect Chinese economic policies to align with the government's move to prioritise growth in 2023. On the monetary front, the People's Bank of China (PBoC) will likely continue to ease policy, with additional rate cuts in 1H 2023. Meanwhile,

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China's Finance Minister Liu Kun recently reiterated plans to expand fiscal spending "appropriately" to aid economic recovery.

However, the space for large-scale stimulus may be constrained against the backdrop of a sharp decline in local governments' revenues. In our view, debt issuance by Chinese local governments this year will be broadly similar to 2022. We expect the central government's fiscal deficit this year to stay at its usual level of about 3.0% of GDP—slightly higher than 2.8% in 2022, but lower than the 2020 level of 3.6%.

CLEARING SKIES FOR CHINESE EQUITIES

Just a few years ago, global investors' appetite for Chinese equities seemed insatiable despite a brewing trade war between China and the US. Yet, from 2020 onwards, a series of negative events impacted sentiment (and earnings to a lesser extent), leading to a major bear market for all Chinese equity indices. Covid-19, domestic regulatory clampdowns, a major property downturn, China/US geopolitical tensions, delisting threats and president Xi Jinping's moves to increase his powers were among the factors that convinced many prominent investors that Chinese equities had become un-investable.

The MSCI China, CSI 300 and Hang Seng indices experienced maximum drawdowns of -60%, -50 and -40% in USD, respectively (see Chart 3). However, all three indices have rebounded massively since the end of October 2022 (by 51%, 48% and 24% respectively at time of writing) as most negative drivers are rapidly fading.

Chart 3: Total return of major Chinese equity indices (rebased to 100, in USD)



Source: FactSet, as of 13 January 2023

Following internal protests, covid-related restrictions were lifted at a brisk pace that defied all expectations. As for the crisis-hit real estate sector, the Chinese authorities have finally put credible backstops in place to restore the most solvent developers' access to credit and buyers' confidence that projects will be completed. The regulatory wave that hit many sectors—from internet platforms to fintech, gaming and education—has now reached the implementation and resolution phase, with very few new announcements. The threat of delisting that hung over US-listed Chinese

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firms has also abated as US authorities recently voiced satisfaction with the access they were given to audit documents in China. Finally, while US/China geopolitical tensions remain, there have recently been some marginal signs these are easing.

Logically, one could have expected Chinese stocks to respond positively to these developments, so the real questions are how fast and by how much.

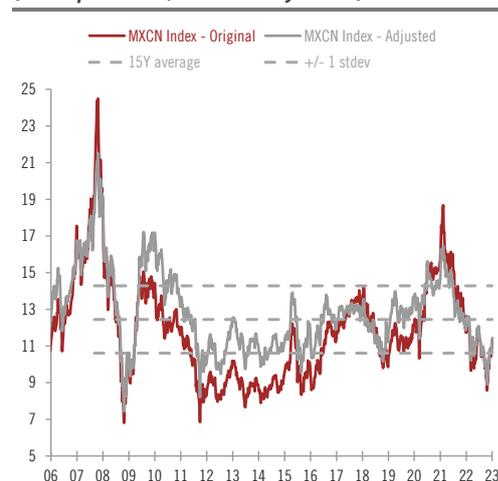
EXPECT A POTENTIAL VALUATION OVERSHOOT

Chinese valuations have rebounded swiftly after hitting a trough at the end of October. The 12-month forward price-to-earnings (P/E) ratio for the MSCI China (including mainly offshore stocks) has risen from about 8x to about 11.6x, i.e. back to its long-term average. Onshore stocks, on the other hand, have gained a less impressive 1.5 point to reach a P/E ratio of 12.6x, still below their long-term average of 13.7x.

The picture is very similar on a relative basis to developed markets, with offshore stocks essentially close to being fairly valued compared to their long-term equilibrium, whereas onshore stocks are still slightly discounted.

We believe there is room for further expansion in earnings multiples for three main reasons. The first is that on a sector-adjusted basis, both offshore and onshore Chinese stocks still look cheap to us (see *Chart 4 & Chart 5*). The second is that positioning in Chinese stocks remains somewhat light after two years of negative newsflow and capitulation by many investors, notably in the US. The third reason is significant domestic and foreign inflows into Chinese equities since last November. For instance, Northbound flows through StockConnect are currently close to their highest historical level, while Chinese stocks are also benefiting from the spike in non-resident purchases of Asian equities at large.

**Chart 4: MSCI China P/E ratio
(12m forward, sector-adjusted)**



Source: FactSet, as of 13 January 2023

**Chart 5: MSCI China A Onshore P/E ratio
(12m forward, sector-adjusted)**



Source: FactSet, as of 13 January 2023

Because of the strong buying momentum, and because China has still to publish economic figures corresponding to the peak of the covid epidemic (which was likely in December '22 – January '23), we believe there is room for a valuation overshoot in the coming months as the economic recovery materialises.

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EARNINGS SHOULD SUPPORT A SECOND, MORE PROGRESSIVE LEG UP

If anything is missing in the ongoing recovery, it is a positive earnings trend. Energy and healthcare are the only sectors on the MSCI China index that have seen a rise in their 2023 earnings expectations over the past three months (in local currency terms). We however note a small positive inflection in the past month for several consumer-related sectors. While the overall trend remains negative due to industrials and real estate, a broadening of positive revisions does bode well and should provide further support to market performance, provided it is sustained. By contrast, onshore stock indices still have to show broad-based improvement in earnings expectations.

We also note that 2023 earnings growth expectations for Chinese stocks are among the highest across emerging markets, at 15% and 20%, respectively, for offshore and onshore shares (compared to zero earnings growth expected for EM equities as a whole). While already in the price to some extent, the ongoing reopening and credible signs of policy support comfort us in the belief that Chinese listed companies can meet current (high) earnings growth expectations.

REVISING OUR YEAR-END TARGET UPWARDS

Overall, we see both fundamental and technical indicators as conducive to a continued re-rating of Chinese stocks. Our preference at this stage goes to offshore indices (such as the MSCI China) as they are more geared towards discretionary spending, and also due to light international positioning and a still-high valuation premium for A (onshore) over H (offshore) shares. But we are keeping a close eye on any potential reversal in this trend as, in the long run, A-shares offer better exposure to themes and industries aligned with the policy priorities of the Chinese authorities.

All things considered, we have decided to increase our 2023 year-end target for the MSCI China to HKD 76 (from a target of HKD 62 set at the time of the communist party congress last October). This is based on a target P/E of 11.0x, and 15% earnings growth. It also assumes that earnings revisions turn positive in the coming weeks, or at least remain durably flat. Of note, currency effects have little impact on our forecasts as we expect the renminbi to remain stable against the USD over the 12 months to come (with potential USD upside in the short term).

Our new target implies a 7% total return from the MSCI China based on the current price of HKD 72.

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