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MARKET REVIEW

Global equities rose in January. The transition of power in the US brought meaningful changes to outlooks for foreign policy, trade dynamics, and economic growth. The Trump administration's protectionist policies and territorial ambitions created a complex economic and political landscape that strengthened the US dollar and increased economic uncertainty, raising concerns about potential trade-related inflation. Against this backdrop, the US Federal Reserve held interest rates unchanged, while the European Central Bank and Bank of Canada lowered policy rates. Japan's central bank raised rates for the third time since March 2024 following a prolonged pause.

Chinese equities went flat in the month with AI-related stocks leading the gains following the release of two competitive large language models by Chinese startup DeepSeek. The country's fourth-quarter GDP grew by 5.4% boosted by stronger manufacturing activity, solid exports and expanded policy stimulus measures. The country's government announced that it will sharply increase funding from ultra-long treasury bonds in 2025 to spur business investment and consumer spending. Consumption data during the Lunar New Year holiday was mixed. While tourism traffic saw accelerated growth momentum, consumers remained cautious about their budgets.

The MSCI China All Shares net index returned -0.3% over the period. Within the index, 8 out of 11 sectors declined for the period. Utilities and energy were the bottom performing sectors, while consumer discretionary and materials were the top performing sectors over the period.

FUND PERFORMANCE AND ATTRIBUTION

- The fund outperformed the index over the month.
- Security selection was the primary driver of relative outperformance. Strong selection in communication services was partially offset by selection in financials and consumer staples. Sector allocation, a result of our bottom-up stock selection process, detracted from returns. Allocation effect was driven by our overweight to utilities, lack of exposure to materials and underweight to information technology, but offset by our overweight to consumer discretionary, underweight to industrials and lack of exposure to energy.
- At the issuer level, our top two relative contributors were overweights to NetEase and Alibaba, while our top two relative detractors were an overweight to Kunlun Energy and not owning Xiaomi.
- Shares of NetEase rose over the period. The company announced its halting funding for a new game studio called Jar of Sparks, founded in 2022. The decision points to a broader shift in the NetEase strategy to reassess and prioritize bigger opportunities. Shares of Chinese conglomerate Alibaba rose over the period. The company also announced its new AI model, named Qwen, and published benchmark scores which they described as "world-leading" class and was better than DeepSeek's V3 in various tests.
- Shares of Kunlun Energy fell over the period. Investors continue to monitor the impact of China issuing a batch of crude oil import quotas for 2025 to its independent refiners. Shares of Xiaomi, a Chinese consumer electronics designer and manufacturer, rose during the period. The company's CEO shared data showing their EV SU7 outsold the Tesla Model 3 in China in December 2024. Additionally, Xiaomi's global smartphone market share grew in 2024, while the market shares of Samsung and Apple declined.

FUND POSITIONING AND OUTLOOK

As we head into 2025, we continue to remain cautiously optimistic on Chinese equities as policy support continues to accelerate. In the last month of 2024, China's Politburo meeting pledged to adopt a "more proactive" set of policies, complemented by "moderately loose" monetary tools, aimed at expanding domestic demand in 2025 and stabilizing the property and stock markets. This marked a significant shift in tone, as the phrase "moderately loose" was only last used to describe Beijing's monetary policy in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2009. With the annual Two Sessions taking place in early-March, we expect there will be more visibility on China's upcoming economic policies. Moving forward, we continue to focus on identifying companies with strong organic growth prospects, sustainable higher returns on capital and good corporate governance.

At the end of the period, our largest exposures were consumer discretionary and communication services and we were least exposed to real estate and industrials. We had no exposure to materials and energy.

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and their investment strategies. If the strategies do not perform as expected, if opportunities to implement them do not arise, or if the team does not implement its investment strategies successfully; then a fund may underperform or experience losses. **SUSTAINABILITY:** A Sustainability Risk can be defined as an environmental, social or governance event or condition that, if it occurs, could cause an actual or potential material negative impact on the value of an investment.

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