

Ningbo Companies on the Global Stage

Ningbo's Next Chapter in Africa: From Goods to Services

By Zhao Yu

On the afternoon of April 27, West Africa Time, at Cotonou International Airport in Benin, Wang Haihua, Chairman of Ningbo Huahe Garments, glanced at his phone as a message from China lit up the screen: "Test the waters for us. Next time, I'll join you in Africa." He smiled and walked toward the waiting car.

This trip was about more than just attending a trade show. Several of Huahe's partners in Benin were preparing to adopt the company's management model—an example of how Ningbo enterprises are increasingly extending their business practices and operational expertise to African markets.

From Products to Services

In 2012, Wang Haihua was just another Chinese clothing vendor, laying out samples of his company's garments at the Benin Center. He had no idea that 13 years later, he'd be advising African factories on the very same soil.

"Selling products was the past. Now it's about selling services—that's where the real value is," said Wang on April 28 at a workshop in the Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone, 40 kilometers from Cotonou.

Factory owner Abdul furrowed his brow as he described a recurring problem: despite using the same equipment as Wang, his output lagged significantly. Wang pulled up a smart management dashboard on his tablet. "The stitch length isn't the issue. Your scheduling is a mess." Red warning indicators flashed across the screen, revealing multiple points of inefficiency.

This pivot marks the survival strategy of many Ningbo entrepreneurs in Africa—shifting from selling garments to providing operational expertise through long-term partnerships. Originally a garment manufacturer, Huahe has diversified into solar lamps to meet the continent's needs for lighting and energy access. Today, its products are distributed across



Benin China Economic and Trade Development Center. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso—but deeper ties have been forged through the export of what Wang calls "Ningbo-style management".

Benin, Africa's largest cotton producer, yields over 700,000 tons annually but historically exports most of it as raw material. With only 12% processed locally, the government has pushed for a shift to localized manufacturing. Ningbo firms were quick to seize the opportunity, partnering with upstream and downstream players to improve production efficiency.

"We're not here for one-off deals," Wang said, scrolling through his list of clients, "we use garment orders as a gateway to introduce a full suite of management systems."

Inside the industrial zone, Huahe's locally trained managers issued instructions with precision. On the workshop walls, the Chinese slogan "Collaborate for Efficiency" hung beside French-language flowcharts—a vivid illustration of the Belt and Road Initiative in action. Products may open doors, but services, it seems, are what build the future.

The Expansion of "Africa's Yiwu"

In the bustling Ganhi Market of Cotonou, the shelves of the Benin China Economic

and Trade Development Center were lined with small home appliances and auto parts made in Cixi, Ningbo. A female client draped in brightly patterned fabric snapped photos of an ultrasound machine. "Can this be shipped directly to Lagos?" she asked in French.

The Benin China Economic and Trade Development Center (Benin Center for short), is a bilateral government initiative launched in 2008. This 10,000-square-meter trade hub, known as "Africa's Yiwu", showcases Chinese products all year round. It has hosted 14 editions of the Benin (West Africa) China Commodities Exhibition. Operated by Zhejiang Tianshi International Economic and Technical Cooperation, a Ningbo-based firm, the center supports trade matchmaking, international bidding, bonded storage, and wholesale distribution.

Chen Weiwei, the Center's domestic affairs director, has observed a distinct evolution on the shelves. "Back in 2008, it was all apparel and shoes. A decade later, appliances and machinery took up half the space. Now, it's medical equipment and auto parts drawing the crowds," she said.

Thus far, the Center has facilitated successful trade matchmaking between 2,500 Chinese and African businesses, the export of over 150,000 metric tons of Beninese agricultural goods, and a total trade volume sur-

passing \$200 million.

"Just last year, the Benin Center accounted for \$30 million in Benin's total exports," Chen added.

Nearby, construction crews worked against the clock as Phase II of the Center's expansion pushed forward. Site manager Tan Mingbang gestured toward the rising steel structures. "We're aiming to finish by August, just in time for the 15th Expo," he said.

The expansion will add 1,300 square meters for auto parts and 500 square meters of smart warehousing—part of a broader push to meet growing demand after a spike in inquiries this April. "Even companies that were hesitant are calling now, saying, 'We're coming with you into Africa,'" said Tan.

Elsewhere in the Center, Nigerian buyers scanned product barcodes, transmitting real-time data back to headquarters in Ningbo. The Benin Center has grown into more than a marketplace—it's become a digital gateway linking supply chains across continents.

Expanding Footprints

When Kenyan President William Ruto visited China following the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Ningbo's industrial footprint was already expanding on Kenyan soil.

In mid-April, a delegation of 17 textile companies from

Yinzhou District, Ningbo, arrived in Kenya to explore supply chain collaboration with local officials. Machakos Governor Wavinya Ndeti welcomed the visit, saying, "The real value lies not only in diverse opportunities but in building a shared future."

At the same time, progress was unfolding on Ghana's coast. On April 19, Beifa Group opened its 15th global brand center in Tema—its fourth in Africa. "This is a key link in our global supply chain. We want to become the 'Android' of Africa's stationery industry," said Chairman Qiu Zhiming, while demonstrating the company's Beifa International App. It connects African stationery manufacturers with over 300 specialized Chinese SMEs in the industry, providing information on production technologies and enabling tailored solutions for everything from school supplies to office equipment.

Data highlights the growing scale of this ecosystem: over 30,000 SMEs now participate via Beifa's platform, and its 15 brand centers continue to drive regional development. "It's no longer about individual breakthroughs," Qiu said, "what matters now is ecosystem-driven synergy."

From Huahe's management model in Benin to the evolving product mix at the Benin Center, Ningbo's Africa strategy is converging on a single goal: making every link in the supply chain move faster and smarter.

Gen Z Mixologist Trains Next Wave of Global Beverage Entrepreneurs

By Jin Yuhan

Wine recipes, marketing strategies, location planning—on a small blackboard inside the "Suyuki Suiyueke Beverage Mixology Institute" in Yuyao, Ningbo, detailed notes on the beverage industry fill every corner.

The founder, Zhou Ding, was born in 2001 in Yuyao. On this day, he's demonstrating how to craft a signature orange juice Americano to a group of eager learners. His content has a distinctive trendy flair: matching drink flavors to MBTI personality types, naming specialty beverages after the 12 zodiac signs, and tips on short-form video shooting.

As a mixologist, marketer, and brand strategist, Zhou seamlessly shifts between roles. His confidence is backed by six years of entrepreneurial experience.

In 2019, after enrolling in university, Zhou, fascinated by mixology, used his spare time to work across foodservice venues. Starting with basic tasks like washing glasses and taking orders, he paid close attention to how each establishment drew traffic and developed popular products. After a year of observation and trial, Zhou pitched a business plan to his parents and won their support.

"What weighed on me wasn't pressure to succeed, but the unspoken expectations," Zhou recalled. Determined not to disappoint, he opened Daniel Club—a bar serving Western food and cocktails. Over the next three years, the once-shy student who had trouble selling membership cards transformed into a confident manager. "My WeChat contacts grew from about 400 to nearly 7000," he said.

In 2023, amid the rise of modern Chinese-style tea drinks, Zhou opened Suiyueke, a tea shop near West Lake in Hangzhou. Within three months, nearly a hundred customers asked the same question: "Can I learn from you?"

"I realized the market lacked mentors with real experience to share," Zhou said. In 2024, he returned to Yuyao to launch the Suyuki Suiyueke Beverage Mixology Institute, shifting his focus to providing industry-relevant training. Classes centered on tea, coffee, and cocktails, with added lessons in social media marketing to help students understand the market and run their own shops.

Today, Zhou has taught over 100 learners from more than 20 provinces across China. He proudly recounted their success stories, "One student from Ningbo opened a Chinese-style tea shop in Ethiopia, pulling in over 9,000 yuan in daily sales. Another, based in Guangzhou, designed a product line inspired by 'Dream of the Red Chamber', a classic 18th-century Chinese novel, and it topped the rankings on a major food delivery app!"

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SPOTLIGHT

Bajiquan Bridges Cultures on Chinese Language Day

By Jin Lu

In celebration of International Chinese Language Day, the AI-Xingchen International Chinese Teaching Team from Ningbo University, in collaboration with the Confucius Institute at the University of Toamasina, Madagascar, hosted a special online event titled "Chinese + Kung Fu: Eastern Philosophy in Bajiquan".

The event spotlighted a performance by Master Cui Zhenfeng, a ninth-generation lineage holder of Wu-style Kaimen Bajiquan and a recognized figure in China's na-

tional intangible cultural heritage. Appearing via livestream, Master Cui delivered a striking demonstration of Bajiquan's hallmark techniques, including "explosive strikes and body-to-body force", vividly capturing the power, rhythm, and spirit of traditional Chinese martial arts.

In addition to his performance, Master Cui guided participants through Bajiquan's intentions, combat principles, and theories of power. The participants followed his lead, engaging with the martial art's movements while delving into its deep ties to Eastern phi-

losophy.

Students from the Confucius Institute at the University of Toamasina noted that this martial arts-based approach to language learning offered a meaningful integration of literary and physical disciplines. Through the practice of Bajiquan, they found a more visceral connection to the warmth and richness of Chinese cultural traditions.

By blending Chinese language and kung fu, the event created a cultural bridge that reached beyond borders. It redefined language learning as more than vocabulary and



The activity brings Chinese culture vividly to life for overseas students. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

grammar, inviting participants to experience Chinese philosophy through movement, breath, and intent. This inter-

active exchange fostered mutual understanding and underscored the value of cross-cultural learning between civilizations.

