

Ningbo Companies on the Global Stage

Ningbo Builds Bridges of Culture, Tourism, and Education with Central and Eastern Europe

By Zhao Yu

Friendship between nations lies in affinity between peoples, which in turn lies in mutual understanding. As China deepens its cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), cultural exchange is taking on an increasingly important role.

In recent years, Ningbo, guided by the spirit of openness, cooperation, and mutual benefit, has strived to become a top destination for China-CEEC trade, investment, and cultural exchange. While economic ties continue to produce new results, cultural and people-to-people exchanges are emerging as a vibrant new frontier for collaboration.

Cultural Connections in Bloom

At Zhenhai's Jiulong Lake, the elegant brushwork of peony painting is building bridges between cultures.

Among the instructors is Helena, a young woman from Central and Eastern Europe. She first encountered Chinese art in 2014 at the CEEC Specialty Goods Exhibition, where she met Jiang Hongsheng, a local artist known for teaching expats to paint peonies.

"I remember the first time I held a Chinese brush. One clumsy stroke and ink went flying. I got covered in a lot of ink," Helena said.

Today, she teaches Chinese painting and language to international students at the "Red Peony International Home", a cultural center that has welcomed nearly 20,000 visitors from more than 170 countries, including many from Hungary, Serbia, and other Central and Eastern European nations.

Each summer, she brings brushes and rice paper back to her home country, holding workshops in local libraries to introduce Chinese painting and culture. These personal exchanges have become a lively extension of Ningbo's growing ties with Central and Eastern Europe, grounded in people-to-people connection and sustained through shared curiosity and creativity.



Polish tourists experience stamp-collecting tour in Ningbo. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

Ningbo's cultural ties with the region stretch back over a century. The iconic verse "Liberty and love/These two I must have/For my love, I'll sacrifice my life/For liberty, I'll sacrifice my love" from Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi's *Freedom and Love* has been widely known in China thanks to the translation by Ningbo native Yin Fu. It stands as a timeless symbol of cultural dialogue between China and Hungary.

The city has since amplified these connections through platforms like the Sofia China Cultural Center, jointly established with China's Ministry of Culture in 2017, which hosted 123 events last year. Today, Bulgarian rose oil, Slovak jams, and other CEEC products are featured in Ningbo's popular shopping districts, while "China Corners" in Bulgarian cities introduce Chinese culture to European audiences.

Tourism as a Two-Way Invitation

"In Ningbo, I've witnessed breathtaking natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and the warm hospitality of its people! I hope to return next year, and every year after—and I welcome Ningbo

friends to visit my country as well," said Martin Zaharieff, Director-General of Bulgaria's National Tourism Association, during his visit to Ningbo last year.

During the three-day 2024 Ningbo Inbound Tourism Promotion event, a delegation of tour operators from CEECs explored key attractions in Ningbo: the Maitreya Altar, Maitreya Museum, Tianyige Museum, and Cicheng Ancient Town. Participants also attended a cultural and culinary showcase in Fenghua.

Behind these efforts lies Ningbo's three-pronged strategy: policy incentives, expanded flight routes, and novel tourism offerings, fueling a surge in travel between China and CEECs.

"With international flights resuming and visa policies improving, passenger flows through Ningbo airport have increased significantly," said an official from the Ningbo Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism.

To sustain this momentum, the city is stepping up efforts to promote inbound tourism. Initiatives include leveraging its 240-hour visa-free transit policy, improved destination marketing, and refined traveler services to ensure a smooth arrival and authentic experience for international visitors, contributing to

both cultural exchange and economic growth.

Last year, Ningbo supported Zhejiang Province's "10,000 Tourists to CEE" initiative by hosting targeted promotions aimed at encouraging travel from Ningbo to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Hungary. In the meanwhile, the city rolled out media campaigns with compelling online visuals and narratives to attract potential visitors from across CEECs.

Shared Futures Through Education

As a platform for international dialogue, Ningbo's education sector has embraced new opportunities to deepen ties with CEECs, including Serbia and Hungary.

"Hungary's Eötvös Loránd University, for example, has produced six Nobel laureates and is particularly excellent in computer science and IT," said Zhou Xunying, Director of the International Office at Ningbo University. "We're working together on student exchanges, short-term research programs, and joint academic projects."

Ningbo University currently partners with over 20 institutions across the CEE region, supporting exchange programs for more

than 100 students. The university has also appointed scholars from Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Serbia as visiting professors, offering specialized short-term courses and co-supervising post-graduate students.

This model of education-based resource sharing and cultural exchange has become a key pillar in Ningbo's broader strategy to make its higher education system more globally oriented.

The city now hosts one of China's first pilot zones for comprehensive educational internationalization reform, positioning itself as a leading hub for China-CEEC academic cooperation. The city has established partnerships with more than 90 universities across the CEE region, covering institutions in every CEEC. These collaborations span joint learning programs, joint research, credit recognition, and faculty and student exchanges. Meanwhile, 27 sister-school agreements have been established between primary and secondary schools in Ningbo and their counterparts in CEECs.

Guided by stronger people-to-people ties and practical cooperation, Ningbo will continue to engage Central and Eastern Europe with openness, paving the way for deeper collaboration in the years to come.

Elderly Ensemble Strikes a Chord in Ningbo's Tiantong Village

By Jin Lu

On the evening of May 9, gentle music flowed from a former carpentry studio in Tiantong Village, Dongwu Town, in Ningbo's Yinzhou District. Inside, a group of senior musicians, known locally as the "Octogenarian Orchestra", was rehearsing for a concert.

Under the direction of Li Yifan, a visiting instructor from the Central Conservatory of Music, the rich resonance of the cello intertwined with the delicate melodies of the erhu, creating an unexpectedly fresh and compelling harmony.

"We're performing in tomorrow's village concert, Sounds of the Seasons in Tiantong, so we're putting in some extra practice," said 82-year-old Shi Dongchu, eyes bright with enthusiasm as he played the yangqin, a Chinese hammered dulcimer.

It may come as a surprise that this ensemble only began six years ago, formed not by trained professionals but by local retirees with a passion for music. Led by Shi, more than 40 elderly residents, most with little or no formal training, came together to form the grassroots orchestra.

"Some of us had experience in local theater or opera groups when we were younger, but many were complete beginners," Shi said. "That changed in 2019, when we officially named ourselves the 'Octogenarian Orchestra' and began receiving instruction from music educators of the Central Conservatory of Music."

Among the orchestra's ranks is Yu Haigen, now in his seventies, who started without any musical background but is now proficient in multiple instruments. Another member, 73-year-old Wang Yinsu, began learning the erhu with no prior experience and has since become committed to regular practice, even branching out to instruments like the zhongruan (a Chinese plucked string instrument) and electric keyboard.

Since last year, Li Yifan has provided regular instruction, covering everything from music theory to instrumental technique, significantly improving the group's musical abilities. She is one of more than 30 students and graduates from the Central Conservatory of Music who have visited Dongwu since 2019 as part of China's rural revitalization through the arts initiative.

In 2021, the country's first rural music classroom was established in Tiantong, offering structured lessons and performance opportunities tailored for senior citizens.

Reflecting on their journey, Shi remarked, "We started out as a few old friends chasing a dream. We never imagined we'd come this far. As long as we can play, we'll keep playing. We want the world to hear the sound of the Octogenarian Orchestra."

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SPOTLIGHT

Scottish Hoof Care Influencer and Ningbo Firm Forge Partnership

By Jin Yuhan

"Not good," joked Graeme Parker when asked about his experience with KVK's hoof trimming equipment. Then, with a smile, he delivered his punchline, "It has changed my life."

Parker, a professional hoof trimmer from Scotland, explained that he had tried using a variety of machines over the years, many of which are prone to jamming or bearing failures—until he discovered KVK.

Recently, two major names in the hoof trimming world came together in Ningbo: Parker, whom Australian media have called "one of the most influential figures in global agriculture", and KVK's Chinese subsidiary, Kewei (Ningbo) International Trade Co., Ltd., a leading manufacturer of hoof trimming machines.

Known online as The Hoof GP, Parker shares hoof care routines and glimpses into his daily life through videos, attracting more than 8 million fol-

lowers worldwide. His content has accumulated over 750 million views, inspiring many to pursue hoof trimming as a career.

Last month, Parker visited Ningbo for the first time, also marking his first trip to China. A shared appreciation for craftsmanship and quality quickly turned into a partnership.

Under the new collaboration, Parker will feature KVK machines more prominently in his content, while

granting Kewei permission to use his videos for exhibitions and promotional efforts. In turn, Kewei will support Parker in launching accounts on Chinese platforms like WeChat Video and Bilibili, localizing his content for Chinese audiences.

Notably, the partnership involves no financial transaction. "We value his expertise and influence," Mao Liya, a representative of Kewei, said. "It's a textbook example of a win-win collaboration."

Graeme Parker. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

