

## SPOTLIGHT

## Year of the Horse Ushers in New Gifting Trends in Ningbo

By Jin Yuhan

With Chinese New Year just around the corner, Ningbo's shops and screens are filling with fresh takes on festive traditions, as horse-themed designs, digital gifts, and connection-driven purchases reshape how people prepare for the holiday. These shifts offer a snapshot of how holiday consumption is evolving in the Year of the Horse.

## Festive Horse Designs Capture Holiday Shoppers

With less than a month to go until Chinese New Year, horse-themed products are making it onto the shelves of Ningbo's supermarkets and shopping centers, capturing consumer attention with a mix of tradition and novelty.

Buying new clothes ahead of the New Year is a long-standing habit, and major brands have embraced the Year of the Horse by weaving equine motifs into shoes and apparel. "Our new footwear series features horse-themed decorative elements, such as stylized heads and hooves. Some even incorporate horse-hair," said Wang Bingxue, a sales assistant at Tianyi Square. Since launching on New Year's Day, sales of horse-themed garment have risen about 23% year-on-year.

Gold jewelry, another perennial favorite for pre-holiday shopping, is also seeing a surge in horse-themed designs. Shi Hong, manager of a mall jewelry store, said 5-gram gold bars and 1-to-2-gram gold notes adorned with horse motifs have become bestsellers for their auspicious symbolism and manageable size. "On one day, we sold 59 of the horse-themed gold notes. We're restocking urgently—around 200 more are



Gold jewelry is seeing a surge in horse-themed designs.[Photo by Sun Jiali, Cui Ning]

expected this week," Shi added.

Local brands have also joined the trend, rolling out limited-edition Year of the Horse products that combine craftsmanship with playful, heartfelt design. "Young shoppers are increasingly willing to spend on products that spark joy, especially around Chinese New Year," said a store manager. "It's more than just shopping—it's a way to engage with culture."

Zodiac symbols are increasingly taking on modern significance, letting consumers express their individuality, connect with others, and enjoy a sense of personal meaning. The horse, in particular, represents diligence and auspiciousness, resonating with contemporary aspirations. Even niche items like the "sad horse" plushie have struck a chord, reflecting the market's appetite for products that speak to emotion as much as tradition.

## Young Consumers Turn to Digital Gifts for the New Year

With just a few taps on his phone, Mr. Zhang booked and paid for a health checkup for his parents and sent a voice message in the family group chat: "I've booked this year's checkup for both of you. We'll go when the weather warms up." It's a small digital gesture, but one that carries big meaning.

As preventive health checkups become part of everyday life, many younger consumers are buying digital checkup vouchers as gifts for their parents, partners, and other loved ones. "More young people are arranging checkups for their parents. Some even accompany them," said Qian Xingjun, director of the Health Management Center at the First Affiliated Hospital of

Ningbo University.

Fitness and wellness offerings are also gaining traction. Digital vouchers for gym memberships and fitness classes have become sought-after gifts. Many gyms in Ningbo now offer annual memberships under a thousand yuan, making them both affordable and thoughtful. "There's growing interest in group workouts and two-person classes. Personal training sessions are especially popular," said Coach Tu of a local gym.

Digital subscriptions for audiobooks, online learning, and podcasts are another popular category, especially for those keen on acquiring new knowledge. Some subscriptions can be shared between friends and family. "My friends and I share a membership since we have similar reading tastes. We can exchange booklists and recommendations; it's almost like having our own digital li-

brary," said a student at Zhejiang Wanli University.

In-game items also occupy a prominent place in the digital gifting landscape. Limited-edition skins and holiday packs for popular games have become trendy New Year gifts. Designed with Spring Festival motifs and zodiac elements, these virtual items let players express their individuality within gaming communities.

From health checkups to fitness experiences, from digital reading to gaming rewards, young consumers are increasingly turning to thoughtful, tech-driven gifts that blend practicality, entertainment, and social connection. Together, these emerging choices point to a broader evolution in holiday consumption, one shaped as much by changing lifestyles as by long-standing traditions.



## "Robodog" on Duty, Inspects Up to 100 Containers Per Day

By Zhao Yu

An AI-powered quadruped robot—dubbed a "robodog"—has been put into service at the Meishan Port Area of Ningbo Zhoushan Port, marking a new step in Ningbo Customs' push toward smart, technology-driven inspection.

At the empty-container inspection site, the robot moves autonomously among stacked containers, stopping to scan exteriors or entering units to carry out patrols, recognize container numbers, and detect foreign objects.

The robot is now assisting with quarantine inspections of inbound empty containers, introducing what customs officials describe as an "AI-assisted smart inspection" model.

Meishan Port Area, one of the fastest-growing and most automated container terminals at Ningbo Zhoushan Port, handled more than 13 million TEUs in 2025. Inbound empty containers totaled 3.858 million TEUs, raising demands for faster turnover and more efficient supervision.

Traditional manual inspections have struggled to keep pace. Daily inspection volumes average around 200 containers, while labor shortages and exposure to extreme summer and winter conditions add operational strain.

To address these challenges, Ningbo Customs deployed the AI-powered quadruped robot. Equipped with optical and thermal imaging systems, multiple industrial-grade cameras, laser radar, and high-precision navigation

modules, the robot can independently plan patrol routes, identify container numbers, capture images, and transmit data in real time.

"Using laser measurement and image-computing technology, the robot can determine whether containers contain concealed compartments," said Zhang Jian, deputy director of the No. 2 Logistics Monitoring Division of Meishan Customs. "High-definition cameras and fill lights also improve the detection of disease vectors and harmful organisms."

Designed for complex environments, the robot can work around the clock with consistent inspection standards, significantly improving efficiency and reliability.

According to Zhang Xiaorong of Unitree Technology, the robot has been cus-



A "robodog" has been put into service at the Meishan Port Area of Ningbo Zhoushan Port. [Photo by Yang Jiangqi]

tomized for customs use and features advanced motion control, allowing it to navigate narrow spaces, climb uneven surfaces, and operate in all weather conditions.

As of Jan 29, the robodog had assisted in inspecting 1,655 containers, achieving a

92% accuracy rate in container number recognition and a 95% success rate in foreign-object detection. During testing, it inspected up to 100 containers in a single day, with overall efficiency expected to more than double compared with manual inspections.

## Zhuangqiao Market Draws International Visitors for Spring Festival Celebrations

By Jin Lu

As the Spring Festival approaches, Ningbo's historic Zhuangqiao Old Street has grown increasingly lively, with its long-running Wednesday Market drawing both local residents and visitors.

Zhuangqiao has a long trading history. The area developed into a town market during the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1911), when trading days were held on a fixed schedule each month. The present-day Wednesday Market continues this tradition, reflecting the everyday commerce and cultural customs of the community.

On Jan 28, the market attracted large crowds to its more than 400 stalls, which sold festive decorations, seasonal foods, fresh produce and daily necessities. Among the visitors were 15 international students from Ningbo University, who toured the market and the nearby Muqingxuan Celadon Cultural Park to learn more about local Spring Festival traditions.

At a stall selling roasted nuts, a student from Mongolia paused at the pistachios. "My mother used to bring pistachios from Xinjiang when I was a child. They were my favorite," she said. Elsewhere, the students browsed spring couplets, red envelopes and lanterns, while learning about the customs and symbolism associated with the items.

The group also visited a historic riverside bridge linked to a local scholar who funded its construction. At Muqingxuan Celadon Cultural Park, they observed residents preparing traditional New Year foods and took part in activities such as making spring rolls and pounding rice cakes.

The visit concluded with a shared tea and meal around a small stove, with rice cakes and fruit — foods traditionally associated with good fortune and family reunion. The students also practiced calligraphy, writing the Chinese character "fu," meaning good fortune, and the character for "horse," the zodiac sign of the coming year.

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