

SPOTLIGHT

Roots and Reach: How Ningbo Shapes Enterprise and Innovation

By Zhao Yu

Some come to Ningbo from afar to build their businesses, while others leave the city to pursue opportunities elsewhere, often maintaining close ties to the place where they started. Through these exchanges, entrepreneurs, scholars and professionals have become informal ambassadors of the city's development.

Known for its pragmatic approach, Ningbo has long emphasized steady support for industry and enterprise. Local officials say efforts to build a strong business environment focus on practical measures—from streamlining services to supporting companies as they grow.

For many observers, the experiences of those who work and invest in the city offer insight into how Ningbo has sustained its economic growth over the years.

From Bangkok to Beilun

In 1922, eastern Guangdong was hit by a devastating typhoon. Seawater flooded inland, crops were destroyed, and over eighty thousand people perished. When news reached Thailand, Xie Yichu, who had already established himself in Bangkok, was profoundly shaken.

He had arrived three years earlier on a junk with little more than eight silver dollars and a bag of vegetable seeds. In 1921, he rented a small 20-square-meter shop in Bangkok and opened a seed store named "Chia Tai Chong."

Later, Xie Yichu had four sons: Xie Zhengmin, Xie Damin, Xie Zhongmin, and Xie Guomin. Strung together, the middle characters of the names formed the phrase "Zheng Da Zhong Guo" ("May China be great and prosperous"). He sent all his sons back to China for their education, hoping they would never forget their roots.

In 1979, Xie Guomin arrived in Shenzhen to explore investment opportunities, as instructed by his father. Even though China's Reform and



Smart Factory in Ningbo. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

Opening up had already begun, Shenzhen was still a small fishing village, and most foreign investors were hesitant. But Xie Yichu told his son, "Even if we make no money due to policy uncertainty, we could still regard our investment as a contribution to our homeland."

In 1981, Chia Tai Conti (Shenzhen) Co., Ltd. received China's very first Foreign Investment Enterprise Approval Certificate—numbered "0001".

The company's connection with Ningbo began in 1991. At a time when many multinational companies were still uncertain about China's prospects, Chia Tai invested \$100 million in Beilun District to build an advanced grain and oil processing facility. More than three decades later, the company's cumulative investment in Ningbo has exceeded 10 billion yuan. In Cixi alone, it has established more than 30 companies within a single industrial park.

The Xie family says the decision to invest was not without hesitation. Over time, however, continued govern-

ment support helped strengthen confidence. During the relocation of one subsidiary, for example, local authorities provided coordinated services from project approval through facility start-up. In another instance, when an egg production company faced feed supply disruptions, it was included in a government program to safeguard essential supplies and the issue was resolved within three days. Such experiences over more than a decade of operations in Ningbo have reinforced the company's confidence in the city's business environment.

Turning Crisis into Opportunity

In his book *Thirty Years of Turbulence*, Chinese economic commentator Wu Xiaobo recalls how entrepreneurs from rural Yuyao travelled all over the country in the 1980s, carving out a market for their telescopic antennae.

The story reflects a broader pattern in Ningbo's development. From early manufacturing of molds and small

household appliances, the city has gradually expanded into sectors such as green petrochemicals, high-end equipment, new energy and advanced materials. Clusters of small workshops have since grown into nationally recognized "Little Giant" SMEs specializing in niche technologies.

Ningbo's innovation has remained closely tied to manufacturing. Battery producer Sonluk, for example, has spent decades refining product technology and manufacturing processes. Meanwhile, Joyson Electronics has evolved from a traditional auto parts supplier into a global developer of intelligent automotive systems.

In November 2020, Wu visited Cixi for the first time, at a moment when global economic uncertainty and industrial restructuring were placing pressure on manufacturers. Cixi, however, presented a different picture. As one of Zhejiang's leading county-level economies, the city has become a major hub for home appliance production. Of China's top 100 home appliance exporters, 32 are based in Cixi,

where above the designated size appliance manufacturers generate more than 70 billion yuan in output and employ about 150,000 people.

Wu encouraged local entrepreneurs with a quote from Winston Churchill: "Never let a good crisis go to waste." He believes current shifts in the international landscape could also bring new opportunities for Ningbo's manufacturers. Demand linked to reconstruction and infrastructure renewal in Europe, he noted, may create significant market potential.

This past Spring Festival, robotics took center stage. Wu's team researched the humanoid robotics industries in cities across China; their findings identified Ningbo as a leading hub for supply chain competitiveness in the sector. Rather than competing with major technology hubs in areas such as algorithms or large-scale AI models, Wu argues that Ningbo's opportunity lies in integrating new technologies with its manufacturing strengths.

Applying AI technology to manufacturing, Ningbo's forte, is the most promising path for the city's future growth.

Ningbo-based scientist among 11 global winners of robotics award

By Lu Xinyan

Xiong Rong, a Qiushi Distinguished Professor at Zhejiang University and chief scientist at the Zhejiang Humanoid Robot Innovation Center, has been named one of the "Women Shaping the Future of Robotics 2026" by the International Federation of Robotics (IFR).

The annual award recognizes women who have made outstanding contributions to robotics research, industrial applications and talent cultivation. Only 11 recipients worldwide are selected each year. Xiong is the sole Chinese scientist on this year's list.

Xiong began working in robotics in 2000 after graduating from the computer science department at Zhejiang University and joining its faculty. She soon led student teams in robotics competitions, developing the university's first RoboCup soccer robot and winning multiple awards.

She subsequently focused on robot motion control, aiming to enable robots to perform complex movements with greater flexibility. In 2011, after four years of research, Xiong and her team developed two humanoid robots, Wu and Kong, capable of playing ping pong against each other.

The project attracted international attention and was widely described as the first demonstration of humanoid robots capable of sustained, rapid-response interaction. The research was later cited in a report submitted to the White House by the National Science Foundation.

In late 2023, she established the Zhejiang Humanoid Robot Innovation Center in Ningbo to advance both research and industrial applications for humanoid robots.

The center's "Navigator" robots have already been used in settings including garment manufacturing, automotive assembly and power grid inspection, and have entered production lines at Beko, a Turkish home appliance manufacturer.

A longtime educator, Xiong has also focused on talent development. In 2001, she helped establish a robotics learning center at Zhejiang University and developed its curriculum.

Many of her former students have gone on to lead robotics companies, including Zhu Qiuguo, founder of DEEP Robotics; Chen Shouxian, general manager of IPLUSMOBOT; and Wang Shiquan, founder of Flexiv.

Looking ahead, Xiong said her team will continue advancing embodied intelligence and developing more versatile, high-precision robotic systems to support industrial development and broader civilian applications.

Humanoid robot training ground launched in Ningbo

By Jin Lu

A humanoid robot training facility has been launched at the Cixi Future Industry Park in Ningbo, marking what developers say is China's first humanoid robot training ground built on the OpenHarmony operating system.

The project is led by domestic robotics firm Leju Robot with a total investment of more than 30 million yuan (\$4.35 million). The facility will recreate nine real-world industrial settings—including home appliance, automotive

and textile manufacturing, as well as commercial services—to collect data and explore practical applications for humanoid robots.

By simulating real production environments, the facility aims to build a closed-loop system linking algorithms, data and robotic capabilities, helping accelerate the transition from research and data collection to industrial use.

The facility will also employ a hybrid network architecture designed to address challenges such as low latency

and high uplink bandwidth requirements, improving the speed and quality of data transmission during robot training.

In addition, the facility will include an incubation community for developers working on humanoid robot applications. By making its spaces and technical resources available to independent developers and small start-up teams, it aims to support low-cost experimentation and rapid product testing.

Developers say the initiative is expected to support



Humanoid robot training facility. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

the intelligent upgrading of local manufacturing and help

develop a robotics-driven industrial cluster in Ningbo.

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