Insight Ningbo

The Ningbo Craftsmanship Behind APEC

By Jin Yuhan

Shenzhen hosted the 33rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting last week, marking the third time China has hosted the annual gathering. As APEC members work to strengthen regional cooperation and promote shared prosperity, the meeting has once again brought the Asia-Pacific into the spotlight.

For Ningbo, APEC has long been closely tied to its own story of opening up. Over the years, the city has strengthened its trade links across the Asia-Pacific, while expanding its connections with the rest of the world.



Shenzhen hosted the 33rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting. [Photo provided to *Ningbo Times*]

The Pens That Put Beifa to the Test

In 2001, when China hosted the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Shanghai for the first time, the pens used by delegates were supplied by Ningbo-based Beifa Group. They were placed on meeting tables and tucked into suit pockets.

"The meeting helped set standards for pens used at major international events," said Qiu Zhiming, chairman of Beifa Group.

The story began in the run-up to 2000. When Beifa Group learned that China would host the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Shanghai, Qiu Zhiming immediately saw an opportunity. "This was the first time China would host a meeting of this kind. Our pens would be used by leaders from around the world. At the time, we needed an international platform to showcase products designed and made in China," he said.

Qiu used his business connections to get in touch with the organizing committee and propose that Beifa supply the conference pens. "We were a Chinese manufacturer, and we were confident we could meet the challenge," he told the committee.

After several rounds of discussions, the committee agreed to consider Beifa's proposal, provided the company first submitted a set of samples. Qiu brought together his design and production teams, and over the next three months they developed four options, each with a different combination of styles and colors.

But the committee was less concerned with appearance than with quality. Qiu recalled that five or six committee members visited the factory. Sitting around a table, they took out the Japanese and German pens they normally used and compared them with Beifa's samples, putting each through repeated writing tests. At the end, they set down the pens and nodded. Beifa had passed the test, and one of its designs was selected.

As China's first time hosting an event of this scale, the meeting left no room for mistakes. Every pen had to meet the required standards. "The pressure was enormous," Qiu said. Beifa had traditionally supplied overseas customers in large container shipments, with an accepted pass rate of 95 percent. This order was different: tens of thousands of pens had to be delivered without a single defect.

Qiu traveled to Shanghai to consult experienced craftsmen at other pen manufacturers. Their advice was simple: achieving zero defects required strict standards at every stage of production. That meant setting clear requirements for materials, manufacturing processes, writing performance and ease of use.

Beifa also sent samples to testing laboratories in Hong Kong. After two and a half months of production, the company delivered the full order to the meeting venue. The organizing committee was pleased with the result. "This time, you have done Chinese manufacturing proud," Qiu recalled being told.

A quarter-century later, as Chinese manufacturers move into higher-value segments, Beifa has taken on a more active role in shaping international standards for the pen industry.

"We used to follow standards set by major international manufacturers. Then we began negotiating them. Now we're helping set the standards ourselves, and the world is increasingly looking to China's expertise in pen-making," Qiu said.

Beifa went on to supply pens for a succession of major international conferences after APEC. Delegates took them home to countries around the world. But the legacy of that first order went beyond the pens themselves: the rigorous quality controls it introduced continue to guide production at Beifa today.

Bringing Ningbo Tailoring to the APEC Stage

At the 2014 APEC welcome banquet at Beijing's Water Cube, leaders from across the Asia-Pacific region appeared in a striking lineup of modern Chinese-style outfits for the traditional group photo.

The modern Chinese-style outfits were the result of collaboration among 22 fashion experts from 22 companies across China. Xiang Jiangpeng was one of them, and the only representative from Ningbo.

Work on the outfits began in 2013. That summer, Xiang, chief designer at Beyond Group, received an invitation from the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology. The brief was broad: draw on the traditions of Chinese dress while giving them a contemporary feel.

"For an event like this, every element—from the cut and style to the details, colors and fabrics—comes under close scrutiny," Xiang said. "The outfits have to present a good image of China and convey a sense of occasion, while also suiting leaders with different skin tones and body types."

Rather than start sketching immediately, Xiang first sat down with his design team to study the subject. They cataloged the silhouettes and decorative motifs of traditional Chinese clothing, while considering how these elements could be adapted to contemporary tailoring and design aesthetics.

After extensive discussion, Xiang settled on a two-part approach: deconstruction and reintegration. The idea was to break down elements of both Chinese and Western clothing and bring selected features together in a way that retained a distinctly Chinese character—elegant, understated and composed. The first proposal took only a few days to complete, but revisions continued for months. "I couldn't tell you how many drafts we went through," Xiang said.

At the end of 2013, he submitted the designs along with a letter he had written himself. The letter introduced Beyond Group, explained the thinking behind the outfits and highlighted Ningbo's tailoring tradition.

Looking back at several unfinished pieces from that period, Xiang said with pride that nearly all the details that seemed traditional at first glance but revealed new ideas on closer inspection had made it into the final designs.

"The new Chinese-style outfits bring traditional craftsmanship and innovation together," he said. "They draw on Ningbo's long tradition of fine tailoring and reflect its spirit of embracing influences from different cultures."

Ningbo's Cross-Border E-Commerce Tops ¥10 Billion for the First Time

By Zhao Yu

Inside the Amazon Global Smart Hub warehouse in the Ningbo Meishan Comprehensive Bonded Zone, automated stacker cranes run at full tilt as forklift drivers move export goods into position. In this high-bay automated warehouse, cross-border e-commerce goods from the Yangtze River Delta and beyond are sorted for shipment, then go to sea through Ningbo Zhoushan Port for destinations around the world.

By November 19, exports from Ningbo's special customs supervision areas for cross-border e-commerce had reached 10.102 billion yuan this year, up 94.87% year on year. It is the first time the annual total has crossed the 10-billion-yuan mark.

Sinotrans (Ningbo) Meishan Free Trade Port International Logistics Co., Ltd. runs bonded warehousing, and most of what its clients store there is everyday consumer goods. With facilitation from Ningbo Customs, the company first ships goods in bulk into the special customs supervision area, where they are sorted and consolidated before being exported in bulk. Once the goods reach their destination markets, the company fulfills e-commerce orders by shipping them directly to consumers.

"Goods qualify for an export tax rebate as soon as they enter the customs supervision zone, which speeds up cash flow," said Wang Xiangkun, the company's customs affairs manager. "In the first 10 months of this year our exports came to about 1.9 billion yuan, and the model saved us roughly 2 million yuan in documentation costs."

By the end of 2025, Ningbo had more than 20,000 businesses operating in the cross-border e-commerce space, Sinotrans among them.

With Amazon's Black Friday sale and the year-end shopping rush approaching, Ningbo Yaji Logistics Co., Ltd. is handling a steady stream of cross-border e-commerce shipments. At its warehouse, shipments are processed through customs declaration and inspection, then packed and dispatched directly overseas. In the first 10 months of this year, the facility handled cross-border e-commerce exports worth about 5.4 billion yuan.

Most cross-border e-commerce goods travel as loose LCL cargo. Since the "inspect first, load later" model was introduced, containers no longer sit waiting to be filled, clearance times have shrunk and logistics costs have dropped noticeably, said Lin Hua, who heads customs affairs at Yaji Logistics.

"Under the 'inspect first, load later' approach, customs officers can inspect the goods before they are loaded into containers, so each container only needs to be loaded once," said Ji Zhou, who heads the Comprehensive Business Section I at Meishan Customs, part of Ningbo Customs. "Previously, workers had to unload containers to make the goods available for inspection, then load everything back in. That extra step is no longer necessary."

A Wrong Turn in Ningbo, and a Ride an Iraqi Reporter Won't Forget

By Jin Lu

One small kindness in Ningbo has stayed with Iraqi journalist Didar Latif, who says the strangers he met treated him "like family."

Latif reports for Gali Kurdistan TV, a major satellite broadcaster based in Sulaymaniyah, in Iraq's Kurdistan Region. He recalled the episode while covering the 2026 APEC Economic Leaders' Week, hosted in Shenzhen.

During a two-day media visit to Ningbo, Latif went out for a walk after dark and lost his way back to the hotel. With no Chinese and no clear sense of the route, he approached a group of young people for help. Rather than simply pointing the way, they offered him a lift and drove him straight to his hotel.

"They respected me as if I were family," he recalled. The warmth resonated all the more, he said, because family ties run deep in Iraqi culture.

Although Iraq is not an APEC member, the summit has attracted considerable attention there. Latif said he would keep his coverage focused on economic issues, given Iraq's push to rebuild and develop.

He said he hoped the meeting would yield positive results for the world, and that many Iraqis were counting on China's support as their country works to build a stronger future.



Didar Latif is interviewed by our journalist.
[Photo by Cheng Liangtian]

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