

“The Starting Point of the East” Exhibition Unveils in Ningbo

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Figurine of a horse attendant with a horse.

On November 26, the Ningbo Museum unveiled the exhibition “The Starting Point of the East: A Cross-Time and Space Dialogue Exhibition between Ningbo and Xi’an on the Maritime and Overland Silk Roads.” The exhibition will be on display until March 23, 2025.

There are 481 pieces (or sets) of exhibits from 39 cultural institutions across China, including the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology, Xi’an Museum, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum, Gansu Provincial Museum, Famen Temple Museum, Guyuan Museum of Ningxia, Shanghai Museum, and Guangzhou Museum. Notably, the collection comprises 68 pieces (or sets) of first-class relics, 79 second-class relics, and 74 third-class relics, making it the largest temporary exhibition in Ningbo’s history in terms of both the number and classification of borrowed artifacts.

It is reportedly the first domestic exhibition across China, bringing together cultural relics from three UNESCO World Heritage Sites: the Silk Road, the Maritime Silk Road, and the Grand Canal. This pioneering event narrates the history of both the Maritime and Overland Silk Roads in a comprehensive, chronological manner.

Ningbo, a crucial starting point of the Maritime Silk Road, and Xi’an, a major hub of the Overland Silk Road, are iconic cities that jointly tell the story of the Silk Road’s eastern origins, bridging mountains and seas to connect the world.

This exhibition centers on Ningbo and Xi’an, creating a cross-temporal journey through five main sections: “Tracing the Silk Road,” “Silk Road Prosperity,” “Symphony of Land and Sea,” “Ports Connecting the World,” and “Belt and Road Initiative.”

The first section, “Tracing the Silk Road,” reaches back to the distant Neolithic era, showcasing the fascinating cultures of Yangshao and Hemudu. Notable artifacts include the human-faced fish-patterned pottery from the Banpo Museum (in Xi’an) and a butterfly-shaped vessel from the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (in Hangzhou), representing early civilizations from the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins.

The second section, “Silk Road Prosperity,” focuses on the flourishing Silk Road during the Han dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD). This year marks the 10th anniversary of the inclusion of the “Silk Road: The Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor” project on the World Heritage List. The exhibition juxtaposes the robust artifacts from the Han and Tang (618 – 907 AD) dynasties with the delicate beauty of Jiangnan artifacts.

Artifacts such as Eastern Han (25 – 220 AD) crystal and beryl beads from the Huangnigang Tomb in Guangxi (present-day Beihai) and Eastern Han pottery boats from Guangzhou narrate the early stories of “Maritime Silk Road” ports. Additionally, the stories of the ancient city of Gou Zhang, early Buddhist dissemination, and celadon production from Ningbo are also featured in this section.

The third section of the exhibition, titled “Symphony of Land and Sea,” brings to life the grandeur of the Tang Dynasty, where both the overland and maritime Silk Roads harmoniously contributed to its prosperity. Linked by the Grand Canal, Xi’an and Ningbo forged a distant yet vibrant connection.

This section features a variety of horse-riding figurines that exemplify the unique fashion of the Tang era. Among them is a female horse-riding figurine from the tomb of Zhang Shigui at the Zhao Ling Museum, which illustrates the custom of women wearing wide-brimmed hats while riding, as mandated by early Tang rulers. Another highlight is a painted female servant figurine from the Astana tomb, capturing the serene moment of a servant resting after work. Additionally, a gold coin from the reign of Emperor Justin I (c. 450 – 527 AD) of the Eastern Roman Empire, housed in the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology, symbolizes the currency of the Silk Road. Various Tang mirrors, painted tomb guardians, and gold and silver artifacts from the Famen Temple also reflect the distinctive characteristics of this remarkable era.

The fourth section, “Port Connections to the World,” illustrates the evolution of the Maritime Silk Road from the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD) to the 1840s.

During this period, many exhibits illustrate a blend of Eastern and Western styles, including a Qianlong period (1736 – 1796 AD in Qing Dynasty) covered cup featuring colorful depictions of figures and stories, a coffee pot adorned with the William Chambers family crest from Sweden, and a porcelain bowl decorated with Greek mythology from the

Guangcai tradition. The exhibition is further enriched by several restored ship models, which vividly recount the story of the “Maritime Silk Road” setting sail.

The fifth section of the exhibition, “Belt and Road: Looking Forward to a New Era,” addresses global challenges and highlights China’s commitment to promoting shared prosperity through the Belt and Road Initiative.

The exhibition further employs diverse technological methods such as historical scene restoration, interactive electronic screens, and multimedia presentations to vividly recreate the development of the Silk Road and the daily lives of people at that time. These cutting-edge technologies work in harmony to empower visitors’ immersive experience and capture the allure of the Silk Road.

To enrich the exhibition experience, the organizers have curated a “1+6” series of events. In addition to the main exhibition, activities include a preview at the 2024 Maritime Silk Road Cultural and Tourism Expo in October, an academic dialogue titled “From Northwest to Southeast—The Silk Road and the Grand Canal of China” held on November 26, a series of cultural lectures named “Stories of the Maritime and Overland Silk Roads,” the development of cultural and creative products, a promotion of the “Ancient Charm Silk Road” intangible cultural heritage market, and an immersive theatrical tour titled “Return Journey: Silk Road No. 1.” The exhibition will also feature a stamp collection activity and various cultural and creative developments throughout its duration.

The museum will offer free admission to the public throughout the exhibition and extend its opening hours until 9 PM on weekends and public holidays. Advance bookings for groups can be made online, while individual visitors can gain entry by simply presenting their ID cards.

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