



Ningbo in Overseas Memories

外国档案里的宁波

“Made-in-Ningbo” at World Expos

The 2025 World Expo commenced on April 13 in Osaka, Japan, and will run until October 13. But the tradition of the World Exposition stretches back to 1851, when London hosted the inaugural *Great Exhibition*. At the time, freshly powered by the first Industrial Revolution, Britain envisioned the fair as a global stage for industrial competition and cultural exchange.

The success of that inaugural fair sparked a wave of international fervor. The late 19th century witnessed nations across Europe and North America scrambling fiercely for this opportunity for global showcasing. China made its formal debut in 1873 at the Vienna World Expo. The Qing government delegated the task to British officials in its maritime customs system — Robert Hart (1835-1911), the Inspector General, and Edward C. M. Bowra (1841-1874), Commissioner of the Canton Customs — who were both deeply familiar with Ningbo.

Their ties to Ningbo—and its reputation for craftsmanship and trade—helped bring the city into the spotlight during the earliest Expositions. Ningbo-made furniture, woodcarvings, and picture frames consistently won international acclaim. Local master carpenters, in particular, became indispensable when it comes to the construction of overseas Chinese pavilions.

Let us begin by meeting Sung Sing Kung, a master carpenter from Ningbo whose skills shined on the global stage.



Entrance of the Chinese pavilion.

The Enigma of “Sung Sing Kung”

Founded in 1799, the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Boston is the oldest continuously operating museum in the United States. Today, it houses the world’s most comprehensive collection of Chinese export art. Among its treasures is an elegant and intricately carved *moon bed*, credited to a mysterious Chinese craftsman “Sung Sing Kung.” The remarkable piece was displayed at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia before being do-

nated to the museum in 1977 by a private collector.

The mystery of the maker’s identity was solved by a single historical photograph. In an image showing the Chinese pavilion entrance at the 1876 fair, the left pillar of the gate bears the Chinese inscription: “Couplet by Li Gui of Jinling; Organized by Sung Sing Kung of Ningbo.” “Sung Sing Kung,” it turns out, was the Romanized version of Sun Xingeng’s name.

A Master Craftsman from Ningbo

In 2022, a Ningbo collector named Mr. Hua acquired another of Sun’s works at a British auction house—a Chinese-crafted, European-style picture frame. Measuring 35 centimeters in both width and height and made of nanmu wood, the frame features twin dragons carved into its columns and three relief panels across the top depicting scenes of people farming, entering the city, and waiting at the ferry.

A label on the back reads “宁波 Sung Sing Kung,” identifying Sun as a carver and frame maker. Remarkably, the frame had won the International Exhibitor Prize Medal at the 1862 London International Exhibition—making it the earliest known Ningbo exhibit at a World Expo.

Professor Tian Li of Ningbo University, an expert on modern Sino-foreign relations, has documented other early Ningbo contributions. At the 1873 Vienna Expo, Ningbo presented

scaled models of Tianfeng Tower, local irrigation tools, and a fleet of boat miniatures—pedal-powered fishing vessels, bamboo rafts, and flat-bottomed sailboats among them. Bowra, the customs official, further enriched the exhibition by contributing five pieces from his personal collection of Ningbo furniture.

Sun’s own contribution included over £235 worth of carved wood furniture: grand bed frames valued at £100, wardrobes and tea tables at £10–30, and picture frames at £5. These clearly priced items proved immensely popular and earned a top-tier medal in the woodcraft category.

The same expo also showcased 195 glass plate negatives by photographer C.F. Moore, documenting everyday life and scenery in Zhejiang. His catalog included images of Sun’s shop and bed frame displays, though the whereabouts of those photos remain unknown.



Exhibit delivered by Sun.