

# Tiny Lights in Ningbo's Alleys: A Retiree's Role as a "Community Diplomat"

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On the afternoon of April 16, a lively life salon themed "How to Choose Quality Clothing" was held at the community service center of Wenzhu Community, Kongpu Subdistrict, Jiangbei District, Ningbo. Several international students sat around, listening attentively to Shirley, a liaison between Chinese and foreign residents. Surprisingly, this fluent English speaker with poised manners is not a language teacher, but a newly retired silver-haired volunteer, widely known as a "community diplomat".



Photo of Yuan Xuelian during her overseas career, provided by the interviewee.

## From Corporate Executive to Community Diplomat

Shirley, whose real name is Yuan Xuelian, was born in 1971. After graduating from Zhejiang Institute of Silk Textiles (now Zhejiang Sci-Tech University) in 1993, she came to Ningbo and embarked on a career in foreign trade. Affected by industrial chain shifts in 2016, she worked in other cities and later took an overseas position. Over more than 30 years, she served at international giants including Adidas and GAP, managing teams of over 1,000 people abroad, making her a seasoned professional with extensive global experience.

Instead of enjoying a leisurely retirement after decades of hard work, Yuan was eager to contribute. Her fluent English, solid language skills and enthusiasm immediately stood out when she joined the community's English corner, catching the attention of the community secretary.

Wenzhu Community is home to more than 1,100 international students and over 200 foreign teachers from 98 countries and regions, along with teachers, students and young entrepreneurs from Ningbo University, forming a mini "global village". With a large foreign population, various issues arose: visa applications, garbage classification, Chinese learning resources and more. Community staff often struggled with cross-cultural communication gaps that official documents could not bridge, especially when cultural misunderstandings occurred.

Yuan's arrival perfectly filled this gap. She readily accepted the community's invitation to be a Sino-foreign liaison. "It's wonderful that I can still use what I've learned and experienced after retirement," she said.

## Connecting Cultures Through Heartfelt Efforts

In June 2024, the community launched the "Lehuo · Yinzhu" Silver-Haired Volunteer Team for Sino-Foreign Liaison. Composed of retired professors, social workers and cadres with an average age of 65, team members each have unique skills: some interpret The Analects in English, some excel at calligraphy, and some are skilled at mediating neighborhood disputes. They share one goal: helping

foreign neighbors live safely, comfortably and warmly in the community.

As a core member, Yuan took on cross-cultural services, acting as a solid bridge between the community and foreign residents. She streamlined translation work—what once took a full day now takes just 10 minutes with her expertise—and accurately identified residents' needs, freeing social workers to focus on essential services.

At cultural events, Yuan serves as both translator and lecturer, conveying cultural essence subtly. She goes beyond surface-level experiences like solar term introductions or dumpling-making, explaining the origins and meanings of traditional festivals such as the Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival in a way foreigners easily understand.

"Chinese culture used to feel distant," one student said. "Now it feels right here in Shirley's dumplings and the tea she pours." Through small gestures and patient conversations, Yuan paved a gentle path for cross-cultural understanding.

## A Modest Light in the Lane, Sharing China's Stories Far and Wide

Yuan realized that large events, though vibrant, could not foster deep exchanges. To help foreigners truly understand China, she and the communi-

ty team created the "Yinzhu Cultural Chat Room" this year. By appointment only, the small room hosts a few students at a time for relaxed, heart-to-heart talks over tea. Yuan helps with oral Chinese practice, recommends Ningbo's scenic spots, eases newcomers' adaptation struggles, and offers a themed "menu" covering tea culture, calligraphy, Ningbo dialect and 24 solar terms.

"Materials alone are not enough for strangers in a foreign land; a chat and a cup of tea matter more," Yuan said sincerely.

She plans to enrich the chat room and take foreign neighbors to explore Ningbo's old streets and shops, letting them experience the city's warm daily life beyond modern skyscrapers. Her goal is to serve a dozen students carefully this year, focusing on sincerity over scale.

"During my overseas work, I noticed many foreigners held outdated stereotypes about China," Yuan recalled. "I resolved to spread excellent Chinese culture and tell China's stories well." By helping international students integrate and feel warmth, she enables them to share an authentic, comprehensive image of China with the world.

From a corporate executive to a "community diplomat", Yuan shines brightly in a new role. Her efforts have opened a window for foreign residents to understand China deeply and call Ningbo their second home. These tiny lights in the alley, though modest, bridge borders and gently connect hearts from across the globe.



Group photo of the volunteer team members.



Yuan was delighted to serve as a liaison between Chinese and foreign residents.

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