

Research on the Conservation and International Cooperation of Ningbo's Cultural Heritage from the Perspective of the Maritime Silk Road

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the deepening advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, the conservation and revitalization of the Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage have been endowed with strategic significance for promoting mutual learning among civilizations and deepening regional cooperation. Ningbo, renowned throughout history as a prominent departure port and hub city along the Maritime Silk Road, possesses a wealth of cultural heritage that serves as a crucial material and spiritual link for friendship between China and the world. Focusing on Ningbo and adopting the Maritime Silk Road as a specific lens, this paper employs a comprehensive methodology integrating documentary analysis, policy review, and case studies to systematically examine the current landscape of its Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage across two key dimensions: conservation and transmission, and international cooperation. The study finds that Ningbo has laid a foundation in areas such as resource inventory, physical conservation, and display utilization, and has initiated international cooperation through participation in multilateral mechanisms and the conduct of academic and exhibition exchanges. However, the current situation also reveals issues including insufficient systematic integration, weak dynamic innovation, limited depth of cooperation, and inadequate international brand influence. Accordingly, this paper proposes optimized pathways, such as strengthening top-level design and systematic integration, deepening physical conservation and innovative transmission, expanding international cooperation and enriching its substance, and building a distinctive brand with targeted international communication. The aim is to provide policy references for establishing Ningbo as a model city for the protection and utilization of Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage and a significant window for cultural exchange and mutual learning among civilizations.

Keywords: Maritime Silk Road; Ningbo; Cultural Heritage; Preservation and Transmission; International Cooperation

1. Introduction

The deepening implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative has not only facilitated economic cooperation among regions along its routes but has also promoted cultural exchanges between diverse civilizations ^[1]. Among these, the Maritime Silk Road, serving as a vital historical corridor connecting the East and the West, has left behind a wealth of cultural heritage along its course. This heritage stands as a historical testament to cross-civilizational exchanges and mutual learning, possessing significant transnational and cross-cultural value ^[2]. The scientific preservation and effective transmission of this heritage, coupled with international cooperation in these endeavors, has become a core aspect of practicing the Silk Road spirit of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" ^[3].

Ningbo, known as Mingzhou during the Tang Dynasty, was one of China's three major official trading ports in ancient times. It reached its peak of prosperity during the Song and Yuan dynasties, becoming an important starting point for the maritime export of ceramics and the spread of Buddhism ^[4]. Historical remains such as the Yongfeng Warehouse site, the Wengcheng (barbican) site of Heyi Gate, Tiantong Temple and Ayuwang Temple, Tianyi Pavilion, and the Qing'an Guild Hall bear witness to Ningbo's profound connection with the Maritime Silk Road ^[5]. These cultural heritage sites serve not only as crucial evidence of the city's history but also provide a unique resource base for Ningbo to shape its cultural identity and enhance its international influence in the context of globalization.

Therefore, this study, situated within the framework of the "Maritime Silk Road," focuses on the cultural heritage of Ningbo. It aims to systematically review the current status of its preservation, transmission, and international cooperation. The research primarily addresses the following questions: What is the current state of Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage resources? What achievements have been made in their protection and utilization? What progress has been made in international cooperation, and what models have been adopted? What are the main challenges and issues faced? Through a thorough review and analysis of the current situation, this study proposes targeted recommendations. The goal is to promote the sustainable development of Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage in Ningbo and broader regions, and to provide empirical reference for people-to-people exchanges under the Belt and Road Initiative.

2. Current Status of the Preservation and Transmission of Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road Cultural Heritage

Through years of effort, Ningbo has established a fundamental framework for the preservation and transmission of its Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage and achieved a series of phased accomplishments.

2.1. Current Status of Resource Survey and Designation

Through systematic cultural relic surveys, Ningbo has largely identified its Maritime Silk Road - related cultural heritage resources, marking a shift from scattered identification to thematic integration. Regarding tangible cultural heritage, a series of representative sites have been discovered and designated as National Key Cultural Relics Protection Units. Examples include: the Yongfeng Warehouse Site (a Yuan dynasty storage site evidencing Ningbo's warehouse management capacity as a trading port); the Wengcheng (Barbican) Site of Heyi Gate (where significant quantities of trade ceramics were unearthed, reflecting the connection between ancient city defense and the port); the Qing'an Guild Hall (a venue for ship merchants' meetings and Mazu worship); and Tiantong Temple and Ayuwang Temple (ancestral temples of Chan Buddhism that historically exerted profound influence on Buddhism in Japan and Korea). These heritage sites, previously categorized independently, are now being narratively integrated under the Maritime Silk Road theme. Ningbo has successfully promoted the inclusion of "Ningbo Maritime Silk Road Cultural Heritage" as a whole in China's Tentative List for World Cultural Heritage. The "Maritime Silk Road" project, with Ningbo as a key component, was listed in the updated Tentative Lists in both 2012 and 2016. In the field of intangible cultural heritage, Maritime Silk Road - related elements such as Ningbo shipbuilding techniques (particularly seagoing vessel construction techniques of the Song Dynasty), Mazu beliefs and customs, and values of integrity and cooperation embedded in mercantile traditions have been partially included in various levels of intangible cultural heritage lists for protection. However, compared with tangible heritage, the interpretation of their connection to the Maritime Silk Road theme and systematic research require further deepening ^[6].

2.2. Current Status of Physical Conservation and Restoration

For designated key tangible cultural heritage related to the Maritime Silk Road, Ningbo has implemented conservation projects primarily funded by the government. For instance, the Yongfeng Warehouse Site has been protected and displayed in situ through the construction of an archaeological park, preserving the underground remains while providing public cultural space for citizens. For ancient architectural complexes like the Qing'an Guild Hall, Tiantong Temple, and Ayuwang Temple, regular maintenance and restoration are conducted to ensure their structural safety and historical appearance. For the Old Bund historical district, adaptive renovation and functional enhancement are carried out under the premise of protecting its overall layout and outstanding historical buildings. Currently, the trend in conservation work is transitioning from "rescuing preservation" focused on individual relics towards "preventive conservation" and "integrated conservation," which encompass the surrounding environment and emphasize routine monitoring and maintenance. For example, urban planning and development in the Sanjiangkou area, where Maritime Silk Road heritage sites are relatively concentrated, now more frequently consider cultural heritage conservation requirements. Nevertheless, balancing urban rapid development with heritage environmental protection from the perspective of an Maritime Silk Road heritage corridor remains an ongoing challenge.

2.3. Current Status of Display, Interpretation, and Utilization for Transmission

Ningbo shows a trend of moving from static display to diversified exploration in the presentation and utilization of its Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage. The China Port Museum, opened in 2014 as a national-level museum with a port theme, dedicates a specific section in its permanent exhibition "Ports Connecting the World: Exhibition on the History of Chinese Ports" to systematically presenting the role and contributions of Ningbo Port (Mingzhou Port) in Maritime Silk Road history, making it a core venue for the public to learn about this aspect. The Qing'an Guild Hall, Ningbo Museum, and others also host relevant thematic exhibitions. Regarding the revitalization of cultural spaces, the Old Bund historical district has been successfully transformed into an urban living room integrating culture, commerce, and leisure. Some buildings house venues like the Ningbo Urban Exhibition Hall and art galleries. Although not exclusively focused on the Maritime Silk Road, their historical context is inherently part of the Maritime Silk Road heritage. The renovation and enhancement of the Moon Lake historical and cultural district place greater emphasis on exploring and presenting its cultural connotations related to scholar-official culture and its subtle connections with overseas exchanges. Digital methods are gradually being applied, with some museums launching online 3D exhibition halls and conducting digital documentation and display of important relics. New media platforms have also begun to be used to narrate Maritime Silk Road stories. However, the development of immersive and interactive experiences is still in its early stages. In terms of educational transmission, Maritime Silk Road culture has been incorporated into primary and secondary school research and study activities, with institutions like the Port Museum serving as practical education bases. However, the compilation of systematic local teaching materials and course development remains insufficient. Public education at the societal level still largely relies on temporary exhibitions and events, indicating a need to improve a more regularized and institutionalized transmission system.

3. Current Status of International Cooperation on Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road Cultural Heritage

Leveraging its historical connections and geographical advantages, Ningbo has initiated international cooperation in the field of Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage, with increasingly diverse forms of engagement.

3.1. Current Status of International Cooperation Platforms and Mechanism Building

Ningbo actively participates in multilateral cooperation mechanisms led at the national level. The most prominent example is its ongoing involvement, as a key nodal city, in the preparatory work for the "Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor" World Heritage extension project (i.e., the Maritime Silk Road World Heritage nomination) jointly initiated by China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Although the nomination process is protracted and complex, participation compels Ningbo to examine and manage its heritage according to higher international standards and has established preliminary connections with other domestic and international nodal cities. Regarding bilateral and regional cooperation, cultural exchanges facilitated through its international sister-city network serve as the primary channel. For instance, cultural exchanges with sister cities like Nagaokakyo, Japan, and Aachen, Germany, sometimes involve historical connections or Buddhist cultural exchanges, indirectly relating to the Maritime Silk Road. However, stable and efficient bilateral cooperation mechanisms or specific agreements dedicated to the theme of "Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage" are still rare. Cooperation tends to be project-driven rather than institutionally guaranteed.

3.2. Current Status of Academic Exchange and Research Collaboration

International academic events on the Maritime Silk Road hosted or co-hosted by Ningbo are becoming increasingly active. For example, relevant departments or universities have organized or co-organized events such as the "Academic Symposium on the Maritime Silk Road and Marine Education" and the "Maritime Silk Road and Mutual Learning among Human Civilizations" academic exchange, inviting global scholars to discuss Maritime Silk Road history, archaeology, and conservation, thus building platforms for knowledge sharing. In terms of joint research, on June 30, 2023, at the opening ceremony of the Maritime Silk Road Culture and Tourism Expo and the Conference on Innovative Development of Chinese Culture and Modern Manufacturing, Ningbo, Zhejiang, released the Ningbo Initiative on the Activation and Utilization of Maritime Silk Road Cultural Heritage. This initiative was jointly proposed by the Chinese Society of Cultural Relics, the Chinese Cultural Heritage News,

NingboTech University (Zhejiang University), the Center for Maritime Archaeology at Shanghai University, and the Ningbo Cultural Heritage Management and Research Institute. The initiative proposes a systematic framework for the protection, activation, and utilization of Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage, aiming to integrate cultural heritage into modern civilization construction through transnational collaboration, strengthen exchange and cooperation with cultural heritage institutions and enterprises in regions along the Maritime Silk Road, and contribute positively to building a socialist cultural powerhouse.

3.3. Current Status of Exhibition Exchange and Cultural Tourism Promotion

Exhibitions serve as a direct method for international cultural exchange. Ningbo's cultural and museum institutions actively "bring in" exhibitions. For instance, in 2025, the Ningbo Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago co-organized the exhibition "Poetry of Monet: An East-West Aesthetic Dialogue from Chicago to Sanjiangkou" at the Ningbo Museum. Simultaneously, efforts are made to "go out." For example, during Expo 2025 Osaka, Japan, Ningbo showcased Maritime Silk Road culture through projects like the digital long scroll Painting Draft of Scenic Tangshan during the Zhejiang Week · Ningbo Day event at the China Pavilion. These exhibitions effectively communicate Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road cultural image. In cultural tourism promotion, "Maritime Silk Road" has become one of the key themes in Ningbo's tourism publicity. Tourism authorities have designed and promoted thematic travel itineraries including sites like the Qing'an Guild Hall, the China Port Museum, and the Sanjiangkou area. However, the primary target audience for these itineraries remains domestic tourists. For international tourists, especially those from countries along the historic routes who share cultural memories of the Maritime Silk Road, the development of multilingual interpretation systems, specialized tourism products, and targeted marketing is still in the preliminary exploration stage. The perception and appeal among international tourists need to be strengthened.

4. Analysis of Current Status and Diagnosis of Core Issues

A comprehensive review reveals that while Ningbo has made initial progress and achieved certain results in its work on Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage, several persistent challenges and underlying issues remain when measured against the requirements for high-quality development under the Belt and Road Initiative and the city's own resource endowments.

4.1. Insufficient Systematicity and Lack of Innovation in Preservation and Transmission

The current preservation and transmission efforts for Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage suffer from insufficient systematicity and a lack of innovation. Firstly, there is an absence of holistic planning. The focus remains skewed towards the management of individual heritage sites, failing to undertake top-level design from the macro perspective of a "Maritime Silk Road heritage corridor" or cultural route. This results in fragmented narratives and weak synergy among geographically proximate heritage sites such as the Yongfeng Warehouse, Heyi Gate, and Qing'an Guild Hall, making it difficult to form a coherent and immersive cultural experience route. The integration of heritage with contemporary urban living spaces is also notably inadequate. Secondly, methods of display and interpretation remain relatively traditional and superficial. Most exhibitions rely on physical displays accompanied by text and image panels, lacking in-depth exploration of the complex global historical narratives associated with the Maritime Silk Road. There is a failure to fully leverage digital technologies and creative design (e.g., immersive, interactive experiences) to revitalize history, which limits their appeal to the public, particularly younger audiences. Finally, living transmission and creative adaptation face bottlenecks. The preservation of relevant intangible cultural heritage often remains at the level of documentation and performance. The integration and transformation of its core spiritual essence with modern cultural and creative industries (e.g., cultural creative products, cultural tourism projects) are insufficient, and a Maritime Silk Road IP brand with broad market influence and cultural appeal has yet to be established.

4.2. Prominent Superficiality and Fragmentation in International Cooperation

International cooperation by Ningbo in the field of Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage is characterized by prominent superficiality and fragmentation. On one hand, cooperation mechanisms tend to be more "nominal" than "substantive." Existing cooperation largely relies on short-term exhibitions, academic conferences, or broad cultural exchanges within sister-city frameworks. There is a lack of

regularized, institutionalized cooperation platforms with stable financial support, making it difficult to sustain and deepen Maritime Silk Road-themed collaboration. On the other hand, the actors and forms of cooperation are singular. Efforts are primarily driven by government and public cultural institutions. Cooperation involving universities and research institutes often depends on scholars' personal networks, while tourism enterprises, social organizations, and private capital—which possess market vitality and international channels—have low levels of participation. Consequently, cooperative outcomes are often confined to the academic and exhibition spheres, struggling to transform into products or services with economic sustainability and broad social impact. Furthermore, international brand building and communication are weak. "Ningbo Maritime Silk Road" has not yet developed into a distinctive, globally recognizable cultural brand that is easily understood internationally. External communication content frequently remains at the level of historical fact presentation, lacking storytelling that evokes emotional resonance and conveys contemporary value. Communication channels also overly rely on traditional external publicity methods, with insufficiently adept utilization of new media platforms like overseas social media, hindering effective outreach to key overseas demographics such as younger audiences and key opinion leaders.

5. Pathways and Strategies for Optimizing the Preservation, Transmission, and International Cooperation of Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road Cultural Heritage

To address the aforementioned issues, Ningbo needs to systematically advance its efforts at the strategic, practical, cooperative, and communicative levels, so as to evolve from having a foundation to becoming a model in this field.

5.1. Strengthening Top-Level Design and Systematic Integration

It is recommended to expedite research and formulation of a specialized development plan for the preservation and utilization of Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage. This plan should define the scope of the heritage corridor, its value system, and implementation strategies. Its core requirements should be integrated into the city's territorial spatial planning to achieve coordinated multi-plan alignment. To ensure implementation, it is advisable to promote the establishment of an "Inter-departmental Joint Conference Mechanism for the Preservation and Utilization of Maritime Silk Road Cultural Heritage," led by municipal leadership and involving multiple departments (e.g., culture, radio, television and tourism; cultural relics; planning and natural resources; foreign affairs; finance). This mechanism would coordinate resources and break down administrative barriers. Simultaneously, digital technologies should be actively applied to explore the construction of a "Digital Twin Platform for Ningbo's Maritime Silk Road Cultural Heritage," integrating heritage archives, monitoring data, and research findings. This platform would provide a unified data foundation for conservation management, research, and public services.

5.2. Deepening Physical Conservation and Innovating Transmission Models

At the conservation level, efforts should focus on the Sanjiangkou area, a heritage-dense core zone, promoting comprehensive environmental improvement and quality enhancement. Exploring "community-participatory" conservation models is encouraged to make residents primary beneficiaries of preservation and transmission efforts. Regarding interpretation and utilization, there is a need to move beyond static displays by meticulously designing several "Maritime Silk Road Themed Cultural Walking Routes" (e.g., "Tracing the Song and Yuan Trading Port," "The Route of Chan Buddhism's Eastward Transmission"). These routes would link dispersed heritage sites into an engaging "living museum" through signage systems, Augmented Reality (AR) navigation, and immersive micro-theater experiences. Concurrently, a special fund should be established to actively promote the creative transformation of Maritime Silk Road IP, encouraging the development of high-quality cultural and creative products, digital content, and performance art projects, thereby integrating Maritime Silk Road elements into urban public art and the fashion industry.

5.3. Expanding International Cooperation Networks and Deepening Collaborative Substance

To enhance the effectiveness of cooperation, it is recommended to proactively initiate the establishment of institutionalized relationships, such as a "Maritime Silk Road Sister Heritage Cities" network, with key overseas cities that share deep historical connections and strong contemporary ties

with Ningbo (e.g., Fukuoka, Japan; Busan, South Korea). Special agreements could be signed to regularly host joint exhibitions, academic forums, and other activities. At the project level, long-term research initiatives (e.g., "Archaeological Research on Exchanges between Coastal Eastern Zhejiang and the East Asian Sea Region") could be launched in collaboration with domestic and international institutions. Alternatively, partnering with international organizations to host regional heritage conservation training would position Ningbo as a capacity-building hub. Furthermore, policies should be formulated to stimulate market vitality, supporting local cultural tourism enterprises in collaborating with overseas partners to develop Maritime Silk Road-themed educational tourism products for the international market.

5.4. Building a Distinctive Brand and Implementing Targeted International Communication

For brand building, it is essential to distill and consistently promote a core cultural IP and slogan that blends historical depth with contemporary relevance (e.g., "Ancient Port of the Maritime Silk Road · City of Wang Yangming's Philosophy"), integrating it into all external exchanges and city marketing. Regarding communication strategy, audience-segmented and targeted communication should be implemented. This involves producing multilingual, differentiated content (documentaries, short videos, podcasts) for audiences in different regions, and skillfully utilizing mainstream international platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Collaborating with overseas influencers, sinologists, and other key opinion leaders for "soft" communication is also crucial. Simultaneously, efforts should focus on elevating the capacity and influence of the "Maritime Silk Road Culture and Tourism Expo" and actively hosting high-level meetings of relevant international bodies like UNESCO, thereby continuously enhancing Ningbo's discursive power in the Maritime Silk Road domain.

6. Conclusion

In summary, Ningbo has laid a fundamental groundwork in the preservation, transmission, and international cooperation of its Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage. This includes completing basic resource inventory, undertaking physical conservation, and initiating exchanges, thereby establishing a solid platform for further development. However, the current status clearly indicates that significant challenges remain in transitioning from "scattered-point preservation" to "systematic integration," from "historical display" to "living transmission," from "exchange activities" to "substantive cooperation," and from "resource ownership" to "brand influence." As the Belt and Road Initiative enters a new phase of high-quality development, international cooperation on cultural heritage has transcended the realm of mere cultural relics preservation. It has evolved into a soft-power engine for fostering people-to-people bonds, shaping a city's international image, and even driving regional innovative development. For Ningbo, promoting the preservation, transmission, and international cooperation of its Maritime Silk Road cultural heritage in a systematic, in-depth, and innovative manner is no longer solely a cultural undertaking but a strategic choice crucial to the city's future competitiveness. By implementing a four-pronged strategy—strengthening top-level design, innovating practical models, expanding cooperation networks, and implementing targeted international communication—Ningbo holds significant potential to transform its profound historical legacy into sustainable cultural capital. This approach can carve out a distinct "Ningbo Imprint" within the global narrative of the Maritime Silk Road, ultimately building Ningbo into a world-renowned model for the protection and utilization of Maritime Silk Road heritage and a vital window for cultural exchange and mutual learning—a city where its historical glory and contemporary vibrancy shine together.

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