



Left: A set of instruments for the Hsianing Ensemble of Myanmar, which comprises ornately decorated percussion instruments like drums and gongs. **Below:** A shrine with five Buddhas from Myanmar. **Bottom:** A ceramic bowl with a carp decoration from Thailand. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Regional relics tell of early living in SE Asia

Exhibition displays artifacts and more from Myanmar and Thailand, highlighting their deep exchanges with China, report **Xu Lin** and **Liu Kun**.

From intricate Thai shadow puppets and finely crafted ceramics to Myanmar's colorfully painted marionettes in ornate costumes and elegant red lacquerware boxes, accompanied by Southeast Asian music, visitors to an exhibition are as captivated as they were on a tour through the region.

The ongoing exhibition, *People and White Elephant: People and Their Lives between the Ayeyarwady and the Mekong*, runs until Sept 6 at the Hubei Provincial Museum in Wuhan, Central China's Hubei province.

It features a careful selection of 86 pieces or sets of cultural relics originating from Thailand and Myanmar, owned by the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, Germany. Ranging from Buddhist sculptures, ceramics, lacquerware, and silverware to musical instruments and shadow puppets, the exhibition offers a full panorama of daily life and the region's cultural shifts from the 8th to the 21st century.

This exhibition is part of the two museums' partnership, first established with a memorandum of understanding in 2007 and renewed in 2008.

Adopting a social-history perspective, the exhibition follows the natural rhythm of a full day and is structured around three core themes — family rituals, monastic life and communal festivals.

The first chapter on familial life begins with household Buddhist

shrines used for morning prayers and moves to utensils and objects tied to food and dining culture.

"This temporal, everyday approach helps ordinary visitors feel a genuine connection, because nothing bridges the distance better than the everyday moments we all share," says Wei Mian, the exhibition's co-curator from the Hubei Provincial Museum.

She compares the curatorial process to a film director casting actors. The selected pieces determine the exhibition's narrative logic and visual language.

To maintain coherence, she and co-curator Georg Noack, from the East, Southeast and South Asia Department at the Linden Museum, insist, from the outset, on jointly approving every artifact in the exhibition.

"My co-curator has extensive experience in Southeast Asian culture and artifacts, while I have a better sense of what Chinese audiences expect from an exhibition on foreign artifacts," Wei says. She notes that despite the distance, they worked closely through frequent calls and emails to finalize the exhibition's many details.

Their selection followed two guidelines: objects that demonstrate cultural exchanges between China, Southeast Asia and India while retaining distinctive local features, and everyday items that reflect regional history, folk customs and religious beliefs.



The traditional attire worn by boys in Myanmar for the ritual when they become novice monks.

"I specifically chose a jasmine aroma with Southeast Asian notes, offering Chinese audiences a scent that feels familiar yet intriguingly exotic."

Wei Mian, co-curator from the Hubei Provincial Museum

Porcelain and lacquerware receive particular attention, given their deep cultural ties to China and their role in illustrating cross-cultural exchanges.

Wei says that when visitors see a 15th-century Thai ceramic bowl with a carp decoration, its white base and black motifs resemble wares from the Cizhou kilns in Hebei province, a major folk kiln complex in northern China.

"The carp depicted here is a major freshwater food source in the region. However, the painting style and the carp's form differ from those found on Chinese Cizhou ceramics," Wei adds.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the royal family and nobility of Siam (now Thailand) cherished the exquisitely decorated Benjarong porcelain, which features traditional Thai motifs and polychrome enamels.

"It's said that many such pieces were made in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, and Guangzhou, Guangdong province. By that time, many Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia were already conducting import trade," Wei says.

"As the exact decoration process remains unclear, it's uncertain whether Thai artisans traveled to China to paint the patterns, if Thai designs were sent to Chinese craftsmen, or whether plain porcelain pieces were first fired in China and later decorated in the region."

She points out that visitors will

recognize that some of the ceramic bowls, plates and vases on display are decorated with popular Chinese motifs, such as lotus flowers and peonies, all showcasing cultural exchange in action.

Another must-see is a set of instruments for the traditional Hsianing Ensemble from 20th-century Myanmar, comprising ornately decorated percussion instruments such as drums and gongs set on elaborate frames and stands. Its principal instrument is a circular set of tuned drums, played by the ensemble's leader, who sits at its center.

Such music is not confined to the past. It remains an integral part of community life today, performed at festive occasions, such as weddings, temple celebrations, coming-of-age ceremonies, funerals, and mourning rites. It also accompanies traditional dances, theatrical performances and martial arts competitions.

"Far more than just a set of musical instruments, it accompanies local people, and ensemble players are deeply integrated into every aspect of local people's lives," Wei says.

By placing a 20th-century artifact at the end of the exhibition, she aims to show that tradition is not a relic of the past — it is a living, breathing force that still shapes how people live today.

As visitors walk through the exhibition hall, they are accompanied by various genres of Southeast Asian music, including those created by the instruments on display, alongside a soft jasmine fragrance. Multiple jasmine diffusers are discreetly installed among artificial greenery installations in the exhibition hall to create an immersive sensory experience.

"People in Myanmar and Thailand adore jasmine. Local women wear jasmine in their hair, and the fragrance is widely used as car air fresheners. Chinese people also have a deep fondness for jasmine," Wei says. "I specifically chose a jasmine aroma with Southeast Asian notes, offering Chinese audiences a scent that feels familiar yet intriguingly exotic."

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LANZHOU — After graduating from Yale University, 24-year-old American Edward Kuperman made a choice of his peers would have expected.

Rather than staying in the United States or heading to one of China's bustling metropolises, he settled in Dunhuang, a small oasis city in Northwest China's Gansu province.

Kuperman, better known by his Chinese name Gu Alhua, didn't come to this decision by accident. His story marks a new chapter in Dunhuang's long history of meeting place of civilizations along the ancient Silk Road, where cultural exchange continues to thrive in the 21st century.

"Dunhuang offers a unique gateway to observing, understanding, and telling China's story," Kuperman says.

Before stepping into his role as the first full-time foreign presenter at a local media center in Dunhuang in April, Kuperman had already built a decade-long connection with China which began with his first Chinese language class in middle school.

Back then, however, he never imagined Chinese would be so challenging to learn, or that he would stick it for years, Kuperman recalls.

His devotion to Chinese culture

deepened through classical literature. One of one of China's must-read classics, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, he found the figure Zhuo Liang in many ways embodying his own vision of an ideal personality — one marked by wisdom, principle, and a sense of responsibility.

"A gentleman may be killed, but he cannot be humiliated," I really admire that sense of integrity and moral conviction in traditional Chinese culture," he notes.

These early impressions of China were later reinforced through a series of short-term experiences in the country, which deepened Kuperman's determination to return and stay longer.

At 17, he spent 40 days living with a host family in Suzhou, a city in East China's Jiangsu province. Though he initially struggled to follow everyday conversations, he wasn't discouraged. Instead, the challenge motivated him to double down on his studies. Later, during his senior year of high school, he also joined exchange programs at Tsinghua University in Beijing, where full immersion further strengthened his fluency.

Now, in the eyes of his colleagues, the young American can not only express himself fluently in Chinese but also use more

Yale alum promotes Dunhuang culture from ancient Silk Road hub



Edward Kuperman (right), also known as Gu Alhua, talks to guests at the Third World Conference of Sinologists in Dunhuang. Northwest China's Gansu province, on June 3. ZHANG WEIJING / XINHUA

specialized, less commonly used vocabulary with ease. Yet for Kuperman, there is still a long way to go before he truly reaches an

ideal level of understanding of the country, something he believes can only come after 20 years of living and working in China.

That is why he feels fortunate to have chosen Dunhuang as the starting point of this long journey. The city's unique natural landscape, cultural atmosphere and warm-hearted people have become the very reasons that motivate him to passionately share Dunhuang's culture with the world.

Since his arrival, his colleagues have helped him settle in. Once, a taxi driver even refused to accept payment for a short ride. In return, Kuperman aims to give back to the city with the same kindness he has received.

Once, a Dutch tourist lost a backpack at a night market in Dunhuang. With the help of Kuperman and local vendors, it was eventually recovered three hours later, a time-frame many would have considered too long for it to be found again.

Kuperman told the relieved tourist, "In China, nothing gets lost." The tourist nodded in agreement.

A video of the incident later gained public attention online, leaving a deep impression on Kuperman and reinforcing his belief that it is not necessary to repeatedly tell foreigners about China's convenience or safety.

"Facts just speak for themselves. That's even better," he says.

Now, Kuperman produces interviews, street conversations and

short daily videos that feature valuable artifacts preserved in local museums and showcase Dunhuang's culture, history and contemporary stories to international audiences.

While his posts have yet to attract large view counts, Kuperman is not in a rush to chase online traffic, as he believes that true international communication starts with concrete, real-life details.

"A real person standing in a real setting, talking about a specific issue or experience, is often far more convincing than grand narratives," he notes.

For Kuperman, conversations like these are needed now more than ever in a world marked by growing uncertainty. And Dunhuang, a city where the ancient Silk Road continues to serve as a platform where people from different cultures can meet, exchange ideas, and better understand each other.

"My encounter with China has been a journey of broadening horizons and rethinking the world," Kuperman says. "It has also made me reflect on my own role and reminded me of the true value of communication between the East and the West."