

Global Times: Archaeology teams use tech to illuminate sacrifice of Chinese martyrs against Japanese invaders

Beijing, Beijing Shi May 14, 2025 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Wen Shaoqing and his bioarchaeology team arrived in Xuecun village. The village, in North China's Hebei Province, once served as a battlefield that witnessed the fierce struggles of the Chinese military and civilians on the front lines against Japanese invaders in the early 1940s.

As an archaeologist specializing in the identification and excavation of martyrs and related burial sites from wartime, Wen found the war relics in Xuecun were very special. Some of the graves there were hastily filled with more than one individual, and many of those buried there were noncombatants, including children under the age of 10.

Why were there so many noncombatants on the battlefield? What exactly happened at that time? Invited by the local government, Wen's team conducted a bioarchaeological study of the excavated remains in Xuecun village in 2024. As their research progressed, they began to uncover possible answers to the questions above.

They realized that the commingled military and civilian remains may well be the result of the local resistance forces led by the CPC holding their ground to protect local villagers against invaders during the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931-1945), fighting to their last breath to shield civilians.

Profound bond

Nestled in saline-alkali land, Xuecun village is an ordinary small village in Cangzhou, Hebei. During the war, it served as a base for the resistance against the invaders.

The famous "Xuecun battle" took place on June 8, 1942, when a unit of the CPC-led Eighth Route Army found itself encircled by Japanese forces in this village. The ensuing battle lasted all day, resulting in heavy casualties for the unit. This was one of the fiercest battles of the time, which revealed the atrocities and evils of the Japanese army, and showed the indomitable spirit and heroism of the Chinese forces in the face of enemies.

Wen, an associate professor at the Institute for Archaeological Science at Fudan University, has been engaged in archaeological work related to Chinese revolutionary martyrs since 2015. In 2024, his team received an invitation from the Cangzhou Veterans Affairs Bureau to visit Xuecun village to conduct identification studies on newly unearthed remains related to the battle.

"Typically, each individual's remains were laid out relatively independently, but here, many people are buried together," Wen said. By analyzing the number of the same body parts, Wen's team determined that there were 101 individuals in the grave in total.

What puzzled the team even more was that nearly a fifth of the remains belonged to children under the age of 14. "So, our next task revolved around unraveling two mysteries: Why so many people were buried together and why there were so many noncombatants among them."

Wen and his students set up tents nearby, spending days meticulously collecting the remains, removing dirt, and conducting archaeological researches. As their work progressed, and in light of the historical context of the war, the team developed several hypotheses. They ultimately concluded that one significant possibility was that the Eighth Route Army had fought alongside the local populace, making a desperate attempt to break through enemy lines and resist the Japanese invaders until the very last

moment.

The remains, though silent, vividly revealed the brutality of the war. Wen said that in Xuecun, there was a basket containing nine sets of remains: four were young men aged 18 to 20, fitting the profile of soldiers at that time. The other five were children, the oldest being 6 years old and the youngest around 1 year old.

This poignant scene deeply affected Wen's team. They speculated that these seemingly "messily placed" remains were hastily gathered by the then local people, who risked their lives to collect them. "These details reaffirm the profound bond between the common people and our Party and its military during that time," Wen told Global Times.

'Restoring her smile'

For many Chinese people today, their impression of "Xuecun battle" may mainly come from a photo published by some Chinese media outlets in 2024.

On April 10, 2024, during the relocation of the remains of martyrs who died in the battle, the local government discovered that one unidentified martyr had his arms crossed over his chest, clutching a small, rusted, and mud-stained round frame. Inside was a barely discernible photo of a young woman.

While the relationship between the woman in the photo and the martyr remains unclear, there is no doubt she was someone he deeply cherished, the Xinhua News Agency quoted a local official as saying in June 2024. Restoring the woman's likeness could provide crucial clues for identifying the martyr and locating his relatives, holding significant historical value, said the official.

Li Yuhu, a professor at Shaanxi Normal University and head of the university's laboratory for the conservation of light-sensitive and paper-based archives, later successfully restored the photo. Li recalled that when the photo was first brought in, it was stuck between two pieces of glass. The photographic paper had severely degraded, with the image layer adhering to the glass, making it nearly unrecognizable and fragile.

Li's team sprayed a fine mist of solution, and then a reinforcing agent gradually penetrated the back of the photo. After a morning of restoration and waiting, the original image reappeared. The woman had delicate features, a slight smile, a crescent-shaped hair ornament, and wore a collared coat.

The once-blurred photo now clearly revealed her face, gaze, eyebrows, hair accessories, clothing, background, and the texture of the aged paper, restoring the youthful spirit of a student from the early 1940s, as described in a thank-you letter from the local government to Li's team.

The Xuecun photo was not the only precious historical artifact related to the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression that his team has restored. "We've also restored photos from the Jinan Massacre of 1928, which documented the atrocities committed by the Japanese. Additionally, we've repaired study and repentance diaries written by Japanese prisoners at the Japanese Worker and Peasant School," Li said.

"Using technology to restore and preserve real history is our mission," he said.

In restoring the Xuecun village photo, Li's team applied internationally leading technology named "recovery and reinforcement of deteriorated or faded photosensitive images" to repair and strengthen the artifact.

Supported by innovative technology, many historically significant photos, including the one from Xuecun village, have been restored, forming a valuable archive of historical images.

Wen's bioarchaeology team at Fudan University is composed of students from diverse fields including archaeology, history, biology and museology.

In these areas, Chinese scholars have employed many world-leading innovative techniques. Wen said that his team uses carbon and nitrogen isotope analysis to infer the hometowns or movements of the martyrs, a practice that is quite rare in other countries. "Moreover, the number of DNA loci we can analyze is significantly greater than that of international scholars," he told the Global Times.

Wen's team has collected DNA information of over 1,200 martyr remains since 2015, many of whom sacrificed their lives fighting against Japanese invaders. The team discovered that many of the martyrs were very young, yet they suffered severe injuries.

Wen describes their work as preserving a precious memory for the people of the present, particularly the younger generation. "They (the martyrs) deserve to be remembered," he noted.

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Media Contact

Global Times

*****@globaltimes.cn

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