

# CULTURAL HERITAGE



As Jiang Bo, an esteemed maritime archaeologist, stood before a photo of a large section of a battleship being raised from the sea, he was in a thoughtful mood.

Coincidentally or not, on Sept 17, 2020, the anniversary of the Battle of the Yalu River (also known as Battle of the Yellow Sea) — a major naval engagement during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) — Jiang and his colleagues brought ashore an 18.7-metric-ton component of the *Dingyuan*, the ironclad flagship of the Beiyang Fleet during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

"In the enigmatic depths, there always exists a connection," Jiang, director of Maritime Archaeological Research Center of Shandong University, mused while gazing at the photo.

*Bear in Mind the History: The Exhibition of the Sino-Japanese Naval War and Underwater Archaeological Findings From the Sunken Warships*, an exhibition at the Shandong Museum in Jinan, Shandong province, has put around 330 artifacts excavated from sunken warships on display, and offers visitors deep insight into history, as well as the poignant legacy of the war on its 130th anniversary.

The Beiyang Fleet was China's first modern navy and grew out of the determination of the Qing government to defend national security. From 1875 until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, the government ordered 46 advanced warships from the United Kingdom and Germany, and also built vessels of their own.

Despite this, the Battle of the Yalu River, which took place off the coast of Liaoning province, remains a painful collective memory for generations of Chinese. Five ships were sunk during the fierce battle, at a cost of hundreds of lives.

The Battle of Weihaiwei, off the coast of Weihai in Shandong province, the following year led to another major defeat and annihilation of the fleet, ending the dynasty's dream of turning its destiny around.

Remnants of this history lay deep underwater for over a century. Following the maiden voyage of the country's first vessel designed for underwater research in 2014, Jiang and fellow archaeologists launched a project to find physical evidence of the fleet.

In the past decade, the discovery of seven shipwrecks in the Yellow Sea has yielded a trove of thousands of precious artifacts that bear witness to fallen Chinese sailors, and to a country's strength of spirit. Painstaking study of the Beiyang flagship *Dingyuan* was probably one of the biggest achievements of the long project.

The *Dingyuan* was built in Stettin in Germany (today's Szczecin in Poland). It was considered one of the best-equipped battleships of its time.

On Feb 10, 1895, while moored in harbor, the ship was attacked by a Japanese fleet and ran out of ammunition during the Battle of Weihaiwei. It was scuttled by its crew to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

Following the sinking of the *Dingyuan*, the Japanese managed to salvage much of the vessel, stripping it of weapons, items of daily use, cables, and coal, taking them to Japan as booty.

"Only the shell of the wreckage remained, settled on the seabed," says Zhou Qiang, a member of the archae-



From left: Exhibits include a sailor's sword from the *Laiyuan* armored cruiser, excavated off the coast of Weihai, Shandong province; a Gatling gun from the *Zhiyuan* cruiser, from another site in Liaoning province; and a bent copper spoon carved with the name of *Laiyuan*.

## Sea reveals fate of heroes

Wrecks from naval battles provide a new understanding of historic events, report **Zhao Ruixue** in Jinan and **Wang Kaihao** in Beijing.



Clockwise from top: A scene depicting underwater archaeology is re-created for the *Bear in Mind the History* exhibition. XU SUHUI / XINHUA  
A porthole from the *Zhiyuan*. An underwater specialist works on wreckage of the *Dingyuan* to preserve it. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ological team from the Shandong Underwater Archaeology Research Center.

Their exploration of the *Dingyuan*, conducted from 2018 to 2020, revealed a significant cache of small-caliber ammunition rounds. Through the use of sonar equipment, the archaeological team was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the ship's hull.

The 18.7-ton section lay buried under two to three meters of sediment. In 2020, after nearly two months of meticulous underwater operations, they uncovered the iron-

clad component, revealing it to be a curved rectangular part of the main gun's protective armor.

In September that year, the team worked with the Guangzhou Salvage Bureau to raise the section from the seabed. On Sept 16, after a full day spent removing sand and securing cables, the remains of the *Dingyuan* were slowly raised.

As it was about to surface, adverse weather conditions caused one of the two cables to snap. Concerned that lifting the heavy piece with a single cable might result in it slipping, the team decided to temporarily return

the artifact to the seabed.

"The following day, with low visibility in Weihai Bay compounded by stirred-up sediment from sand removal, we had to rely solely on tactile senses underwater," Zhou says.

After around 10 hours of dredging, cable threading and hoisting, the piece was finally raised to the salvage vessel.

"As the component was securely placed on the salvage vessel's deck, we erupted into spontaneous applause. The excavated piece is a poignant homage to fallen heroes," he says.

It was this moment that was captured in the photo on exhibition.

In 2022, wreck of the *Dingyuan* became the first provincial-level protection zone of underwater heritage site in Shandong.

In addition to excavated components, weapons and ammunition, the ongoing exhibition, which will last until the end of October, also displays many of the crew's daily items, including identity tags, porcelain bowls, leather shoes, mahjong tiles, chess pieces, buttons and fragrance bottles, creating a tangible connection to the past. Thanks to them, the

cold record of battle is warmed by items of human interest.

Zhou found a bent silver-plated copper spoon by chance during a dive to explore the armored cruiser *Laiyuan* off the coast near Weihai in 2023, at a time when the ship's identity had not yet been confirmed.

"I couldn't see clearly underwater due to low visibility, and just happened to touch an object that looked like a spoon," he recalls.

Once on land, he saw that it was inscribed with the Chinese characters *lai yuan*, making it the first artifact from the site to identify the ship.

Two wooden identity tags retrieved from the shipwreck also helped with identification. The tags are now on exhibit after being soaked in saltwater for preservation. One of the tags has the Chinese characters for *lai yuan*, "third-class sailor," and "Yu Shengyuan," the name of the sailor in question.

The 82-meter armored cruiser was commissioned from Germany by the Qing royal court and was finished in 1887. Other articles discovered in the wreckage of the *Laiyuan* include Chinese chess sets, leather shoes, a fragrance bottle, porcelain bowls and combs. All are on display.

Some findings may help partly set the record straight. The general public has long suspected that one of the main reasons why the Beiyang Fleet lost the war was that the Qing government refused to provide the funds to update their naval facilities for a number of years.

Documents show that the fleet made a request to add new canons to the *Laiyuan*. Shell fuses found in the shipwreck confirm that the vessel had been reinforced for conflict.

"The building of the Beiyang Fleet was a crucial attempt to modernize," Jiang says, adding that archaeological research can help clarify what had previously been questioned.

The culmination of 10 years of underwater work has not only refined methodologies for investigating shipwrecks, but also leveraged technologies, such as sonar and 3D modeling.

"The use of marine magnetometers has played an important role in locating shipwrecks," Jiang says.

The artifacts also provide significant physical evidence to researchers studying the history of a range of specialization, including the Beiyang Fleet, the Sino-Japanese War, and the history of East Asia, Jiang adds.

Zhou echoes Jiang's view.

"We plan to summarize and release reports on the seven vessels based on 10 years of underwater archaeological achievements to provide material for fields, such as the study of naval vessels and vessel equipment," he says.

A report on the cruiser *Zhiyuan*, the first Beiyang ship that was rediscovered from another site in Liaoning province, has been completed and is on show at the exhibition.

"Ships can be an emotional topic," Jiang says. "Through the remains, we see how sailors sacrificed their lives for the country. Historical study involves flesh and blood, as well as a human touch, as it goes into plentiful details."

*Liu Chuan contributed to this story.*

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## Key evidence found at leading base against Japanese aggression

By **WANG QIAN**  
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In the past, historical accounts of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army, a Communist-led guerrilla force during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45), were mainly recorded in archives and documents, prompting researchers to seek more tangible evidence.

The excavation of the first anti-Japanese guerrilla base established by the Communist Party of China in the northeastern region — Hongshilazi — has provided archaeological discoveries to enhance the study of the history.

Located 20 kilometers west of Panshi city in Northeast China's Jilin province, the Hongshilazi Site, spanning about 32 square kilometers, served as a crucial base to resist Japanese aggression, and today provides remnants, such as barracks, outposts, defensive fortifications and military training grounds.

"The study of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army used to face the challenge of being 'historically

untraceable," says Meng Qingxu, leader of the Hongshilazi Site's excavation team. "In recent years, the archaeological work at the site has provided detailed materials to prove the 14-year history of the guerrilla force's resistance."

For 14 years, soldiers of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army waged an arduous struggle against the Japanese militarist aggressors.

The Sept 18 Incident in 1931, when the Japanese invaders triggered an explosion on a section of a railway owned by a Japanese company near Shenyang, Liaoning province, and falsely accused Chinese troops of sabotage, marked the beginning of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. The Japanese invaders occupied Northeast China in the following months and the "Manchukuo" puppet regime was established.

The Hongshilazi Site is widely considered the largest and among the most significant complexes commemorating Chinese people's strong resistance against the Japanese invaders in Northeast China, as it was one of the earliest anti-Japa-



An archaeologist works at the Hongshilazi Site in Panshi, a city in Jilin province, the first guerrilla base established by the Communist Party of China in the northeast during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45). PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

nese aggression bases under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. The resistance preceded the nationwide full-scale war that ultimately culminated in victory for China.

At the Hongshilazi guerrilla base, excavation teams from the Jilin Pro-

vincial Institute of Archaeology have found more than 3,300 war remnants that have shed new light on the battlefields. Designated as the eighth batch of national key cultural relic protection units by the State Council in 2019, the site was shortlisted for the country's top 10

archaeological discoveries for 2023.

The discoveries at the Hongshilazi Site have been showcased in various museums within and outside Jilin, attracting more than 700,000 visitors so far.

"Closely intertwining with the history of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army, the items selected have unveiled a vivid story at the Hongshilazi Site," says Li Qihong, director of the Panshi Museum, also known as the Panshi Memorial Hall for the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.

The importance of such an exhibition is that it not only protects revolutionary relics, but also delves into the essence behind them, Liu adds.

To better protect, manage and utilize the discoveries at the sites and illuminate the war and its legacy, a meeting highlighting the cultural relics related to the period in Northeast China was held in Panshi early this month.

Officials from central and local government departments and experts from cultural relics institutes discussed how to enhance heritage protection and utilization to improve

remembrance and education.

By the end of last year, a total of 608 sites related to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, 24 commemorative venues and about 100,000 items of cultural relics had been documented and registered nationwide, according to statistics from the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

At his speech addressing the meeting, Li Qun, director of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, called for concerted efforts to deepen the exploration of the value of these relics, and coordinate the planning and orderly progress of archaeological surveys and excavations of the sites.

To mark the 80th anniversary of the Chinese people's victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the end of World War II, which will fall in 2025, the National Cultural Heritage Administration, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Ministry of Finance issued a three-year plan last year to conduct a thorough census of the relics and artifacts during the period.