

Restoring the Voices of the Forgotten: The Hunan LongYue Peace and Public Welfare Center's Efforts to Reunite World War II National Revolutionary Army Soldiers with their Homeland and Families in China



Sun, C. ¹, Yu, H. ², Congram, D. ³ and Hou, L. ⁴

ABSTRACT

The Hunan LongYue Peace and Public Welfare Center, a Chinese nongovernmental organization (NGO), works to locate, identify, and respectfully repatriate the remains of World War II (WWII) National Revolutionary Army soldiers, honoring forgotten heroes and reuniting families separated by war. LongYue reconnects legacies of bravery with homeland, bridging together past and present through work in remote regions.

INTRODUCTION

Journalist Chunlong Sun registered the Hunan LongYue Peace Public Welfare Development Center (hereafter "LongYue") in China, in 2017. It was created to address separated families: veterans who had fought Japanese occupation during World War II and who could not return to China because of the subsequent Civil War. Mr. Sun was moved by the fact that these veterans - once heroes, working with Allied forces - had subsequently suffered decades of separation from their families. Some of these veterans had died abroad.

LongYue worked to obtain temporary visas to allow surviving veterans to enter China and reunite with their families. For those veterans who had died, LongYue decided to work to locate and restore burial sites.

Receiving significant support from families, local authorities, and military veterans, LongYue later began to search for unmarked burials of those who had died fighting against Japanese occupation in mainland China. When permitted by local authorities, LongYue recovers the remains and buries them at memorials or returns them to surviving families in China.



In April 2015, in Myitkyina, Myanmar, a four-month operation to recover the remains of the Chinese Expeditionary Force was launched, resulting in the collection of a total of 347 remains.

METHODOLOGY

LongYue has some paid staff but relies on many volunteers. The office, in the city of Changsha, hosts a museum that is dedicated to honoring veterans and telling their stories. The museum features letters, photographs, and material objects such as tombstones, coins, and clothing of veterans. The display of these things is part of LongYue's mission to ensure that those who fought for China's freedom are remembered and honored. In addition to the museum, working with witnesses, experts in academia, and local authorities, LongYue:

- Organizes battlefield and burial site visits for commemoration ceremonies
- Conducts historical investigation to locate marked and unmarked burial sites of soldiers
- Builds and repairs cemeteries and monuments for the dead
- Maintains a DNA database of remains recovered to try to match with families
- Working with partners, analyzes remains and conducts DNA analysis for the purposes of identification
- Provides the dead with dignified reburial, in their hometown, if possible



Before each excavation, solemn rituals and commemorative ceremonies are conducted in accordance with local customs to honor the fallen and provide solace to their spirits.

In 2024, LongYue was awarded funds from the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center (HHRRCC) to work with a Fellow of the Anthropology Section of AAFS to develop field protocols for the search and excavation of unmarked burials.

RESULTS

To date, LongYue has assisted 341 veterans to reunite with their families. 1,512 bodies of former soldiers have been recovered for dignified reburial. In general, there are two levels of identification: group and individual. Often, Chinese soldiers can be identified at a group level by material objects recovered with their bodies (e.g., unit insignia, buttons, coins, letters), often in combination with witness testimony. Individual identification is much more challenging, especially since medical and dental records of those who died do not exist. Therefore, individual identification relies on genetic matches with family DNA, also in conjunction with historical research and witness testimony. To date, two bodies recovered have been individually identified.

In August 2024, LongYue inaugurated a memorial for soldiers who had been recovered in Hunan Province and who could not be individually identified. In October, AAFS Anthropology Fellow, Dr. Derek Congram, visited LongYue and accompanied staff on a battlefield mass burial prospection. Together with LongYue staff and co-author Dr. Lei Hou, they have compiled protocols from comparative organizations dedicated to the search and recovery of missing persons in combat contexts and are developing a protocol that caters to the unique conditions and circumstances of LongYue's mandate - in particular the pending loss of all living witnesses.



Beginning in Myanmar, efforts to locate the remains of soldiers who perished during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression have expanded to various provinces in China, including Yunnan, Hunan, Anhui, and Henan.



To ensure proper burial, preserve the dignity of fallen soldiers and veterans, and pass down the historical legacy of the war, LongYue has constructed or restored 143 anti-Japanese war memorial cemeteries, monuments, and veteran burial sites across China.

DISCUSSION

There are several organizations around the world - both state and civil society-based - that dedicate themselves to the search, identification, and memorialization of those who have died in past armed conflict, notably the United States Department of Defense Accounting Agency. However, there is often poor engagement and coordination among these organizations, even though those who they are searching for fought together during conflicts. LongYue will continue to professionalize and advance their work, but also hope to exchange experience with others so that the shared values and methods can develop together.



In the United States, 52 Chinese airmen who trained there during the war rest at the Fort Bliss National Cemetery. LongYue successfully identified the families of 38 of these airmen and, in 2019, organized a visit for their relatives to pay tribute in the United States.

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1. Founder, Hunan LongYue Peace Charity Development Center
2. Secretary General, Hunan LongYue Peace Charity Development Center
3. School of Postgraduate Studies, Department of Archaeology, PUCP (Peru); Simon Fraser University, Department of Archaeology
4. NAM-HKU Global Health Leadership Fellow School of Public Health, Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine, The University of Hong Kong National Academy of Medicine