Members of the first Chinese naval delegation to Europe

Chinese sailors’ graves restored in Northeast England

Final preparations are underway to restore the graves of five Chinese sailors who were part of two delegations and died from illness (two in 1881 and three in 1887) in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, a city in Northeastern England. Experts consider the tombs to be historical artifacts that mark the birth of the Beiyang or Northern Fleet, the most powerful naval force assembled by China during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), which included four battle cruisers purchased from the United Kingdom between 1881 and 1887. Located in St. John’s Cemetery in the Elswick district of the city, the graves—three of which have collapsed and are half-sunken—contain the remains of Yuan Peifu, Gu Shizhong, Lian Jinyuan, Chen Shoufu and Chen Chengkui, members of the first two naval delegations that China sent to Europe, the China Daily reported.

The five men died from unidentified illnesses while waiting to bring the cruisers back to China, according to Chen Yue, president of the Chinese Naval Historical Institute. Despite the contribution of the British ships, the Chinese fleet was defeated by Imperial Japan during the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). Last year, photos of the cracked tombstones were posted online by a Chinese student at the Royal College of Art in London and quickly attracted the attention in China.

(continued on page 2)
In December, the Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation, a non-profit organization, launched its first global crowdfunding campaign with the aim of raising 460,000 yuan (63,000 euro) to pay for the restoration work, according to Li Xiaojie, the foundation's president. The campaign is ongoing. The tombstones in Newcastle-upon-Tyne are Chinese landmarks overseas, and as such are of great historical value, according to Chen Yue, president of the Chinese Naval Historical Institute. “They are rare historical artifacts of the Qing’s modernization movement and Chinese naval history in general,” he said. The China Foundation for Cultural Heritage Conservation and the Newcastle city government have now approved the survey, budget and repair plan. Repairs will begin in April and will be concluded by August.

In September, Zhang Rong, the chief engineer for the tombstone restoration project, and his team, which is employed by Li’s foundation, flew to Newcastle to clean, inspect the graves, and discuss the restoration plans with local experts and city officials. Initially, Zhang, who is also deputy chief engineer of the Beijing Guowenyan Cultural Heritage Conservation Center, thought the work would be easy, but he quickly realized that his optimism was misplaced. “It turned out to be the trickiest project I have ever worked on. The repairs must adhere to the protection laws and standards of both countries,” Zhang said. For example, in China, repairing broken tombstones only requires the stones to be glued back together. In Britain, however, in addition to gluing, steel reinforcing rods have to be inserted too, “so the tombstones won't break and fall on visitors”, Zhang said. Certain sections of the graves need to be replaced because they are badly damaged, but the team is trying to keep as much of the original material as possible. The headstones are so large that special lifting equipment will be needed to carry out the work.

The first two graves were purchased by the Chinese government in 1881, and the other three in 1887. They cost 5 pounds each at the time, which would equate to about 1,000 pounds (1,140 euro) per grave in modern terms, according to Alan Macfarlane, historian and professor emeritus at King's College, Cambridge University. “It does not seem very much, but in fact, at the time, the Chinese were relatively short of foreign currency, so it really was a great sacrifice,” he said. “It was really a wonderful thing that was done because so many Chinese sailors were lost all over the world, and very, very few of them have been remembered. It is marvelous that we are now able to remember one or two of them.” The Northern Britain Chinese Entrepreneurs Association, which is based in Newcastle, has become a major player in the restoration project, thereby helping overseas Chinese in Newcastle to better integrate with the local community, and local people to understand some Chinese history and traditions, the China Daily reported.

Q&A

Are organs of executed prisoners still used for transplants?
The practice is now officially outlawed since January 1, 2015 and Dr. Huang Jiefu told a conference at the Vatican that violations of the prohibition would be severely punished.

How many undertakers and cemeteries are there in China?
There are about 5,000 undertakers and 1,500 cemeteries in China, and the whole funeral industry is now estimated to value 90 billion yuan (12 billion euro), with an annual compound growth rate of around 15 percent.

How many cemeteries are there in Shanghai?
The city has 44 cemeteries, mostly located in the Jiading, Qingpu, Baoshan, Fengxian and Pudong districts.

What are the prospects of China’s elderly population?
China’s elderly population will double from 212 million in 2014 to around 400 million by 2050, according to the National Health and Family Planning Commission.

How many people pass away in a city such as Shanghai every year?
In 2015, 129,000 people died in the city and the figure is rising every year.

How many people went to cemeteries in Shanghai on the winter solstice?
955,800 tomb sweepers visited cemeteries on Dongzhi or the winter solstice (Dec. 21).
**POLICIES**

Underreporting the death toll

Underreporting disaster death tolls could compromise relief efforts, since higher authorities may not be aware of the seriousness of the situation, an expert told the Global Times after reports that the local government of Xiuyan county in Liaoning province underreported deaths from flooding in August 2012. The local government set up a special investigation team after news agencies reported discrepancies in the death toll. Officials responsible for fake reports will be held legally accountable. A casualty list of 38 names from the 2012 disaster was sent to China National Radio (CNR), claiming that the local county government concealed the actual death toll. The list was provided by a retired employee with the local government, who spent years collecting and verifying the information. Two days after the flood, the county government said only five people were confirmed to have died and another three were listed as missing. One villager was told by township officials not to report the deaths of family members and he was given 20,000 yuan (2,750 euro) for each non-reported death. An official paid someone 1,000 yuan (140 euro) to carry the remains up a mountain for cremation with gasoline to avoid it being taken to a crematorium. Peng Zongchao, deputy president of the School of Public Policy and Management under Tsinghua University, told the Global Times that it was possibly due to an instinct for self-protection that the local officials chose to conceal the true death toll. According to the Regulation on the Relief of Natural Disasters, when the death toll is over 30, the National Disaster Reduction Committee should get involved.

**CULTURE**

Chinese ‘grave class’ helps divorced women

A divorcee in southwest China has started a down-to-earth movement that helps women recover from failed marriages by lying in mock graves to combat suicidal thoughts as they recover from their heartbreak. In one class on a hillside in Chongqing, 13 women took turns to lie in freshly dug pits as part of the “grave classroom” program. Plagued by depression, the women lie in the pits as they contemplate life and death on the path to regaining their strength, according to the China Youth Daily. Liu Taijie, the group’s founder, said that after her divorce she lost hope and attempted suicide but managed to pull herself together by changing her perspective on life and death. “I was abandoned by my husband. I was despised by my family. I was deceived by a pyramid selling scam. I wanted to die,” she said in a video published by People’s Daily. The 30-year-old was married at 19, became a mother at 21 and was abused by her husband at 27 after the failure of a business she started, which led to her divorce. She said she wallowed in sorrow for more than a year before she started feeling positive about life again. Her program aims to allow divorcees to confront death head-on and remind them that there are plenty of opportunities left in the world. “Tears are useless. Death cannot solve problems. I want to change, and use that experience to help other women,” she said. Once she got over her past, she shed more than 30 kg in weight and now runs a successful business. Liu will hold the “grave classroom” once every two months free of charge for whoever needs it. “Failure is not scary,” she said. “I hope all divorced women can lead new lives and accomplish their own goals. Women must rely on themselves and be their own queens,” she said, as reported by the South China Morning Post.

Chinese crematorium worker live-streams cremations

Social media users in China have been horrified to find videos of cremations posted online along with inappropriate comments. The faces of the deceased were reportedly visible in some of the footage. The live-streaming platform Kuaishou shut down the Chengdu Funeral Services account after a 20-year old employee at a local crematorium had live-streamed several cremations of remains, including close-ups of the remains being prepared. The man had also added text comments to the videos he uploaded.
“Come quickly to warm yourself at the fire,” he commented on one video showing flames inside the cremation chamber. “Accidental death, don’t click if you are too timid,” he warned on another one, which showed a body wrapped in yellow cloth lying inside the morgue. Some of the videos showed family members paying their last respects to their departed relatives at the entrance to the cremation chamber. In others, bodies were shown being carried into the crematorium on stretchers. The videos are no longer available online. It was not reported whether the man would be disciplined by his employer. Users of the social media site Weibo accused the man of lacking both professional ethics and empathy. “He will probably never understand the helplessness and heartache of watching a person you love disappear in front of you,” one commenter said. Another added: “I hope the person who streamed these videos will be burned himself.”

Rescuing human remains free of charge

Cao Chunyu, 60, founder of Blue Sky Rescue, one of China’s largest civilian rescue teams in Anhui province, is spending his days shifting through piles of human remains, pulling them out of rivers and performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Considered “unclean” by some, Cao refuses to see himself as a hero. “I am an average person without big ambitions. I just do my part to help others in need,” Cao said. Over the past six years, Cao’s team has retrieved nearly 1,000 human remains free of charge in nationwide rescue missions, with the work personally costing him more than 1 million yuan (140,000 euro). Cao was once a successful entrepreneur in Fuyang city in Anhui, but in 2010 after volunteering at the site of the Yushu earthquake in Qinghai province, which left more than 2,200 people dead, rescue work became his calling. Returning from the quake area, he founded the Blue Sky Rescue team, focusing on rescue work. “At first no people except my wife, son and relatives were willing to join us, as the work was unpaid. We did not know anything about volunteering or city rescue. We were just exploring in the dark,” Cao said. Superstition and the gruesome nature made people wary of his work and worrying that contact with him might bring bad luck. “I was also scared when I first saw human remains, but I told myself I was saving people. Human remains should also have dignity and salvaging them will not bring misfortune,” Cao said. Cao’s grievances are compensated by the gratitude he receives from relatives of the departed. “I still remember a mission in July 2015 when Cao, only in his underwear and life jacket, jumped into a river to salvage human remains when he saw the relatives in deep sorrow. “The dead’s mother, a 70-year-old woman, was so moved that she just knelt down by Cao. Everybody cried,” said Han Xiangfei, deputy director of the Blue Sky Rescue team in Fuyang. Now his 200-member team has earned fame nationwide after taking part in many important rescue operations. In 2014, Cao’s team completed over 260 missions, 80 percent of which were due to teenagers drowning. “We are volunteers helping people for free and are not doing businesses for money. We will continue our mission,” Cao said.

BUSINESS

Shanghai starts to offer funeral planning contracts

People in Shanghai can now plan their own funerals by signing a prepaid contract with a funeral services provider detailing arrangements for their last rites. Fu Shou Yuan International Group, the largest death care and funeral services provider in China, has started to offer reservations for such a service in Shanghai. It plans to officially launch the program this year, a pioneering move in a culture where people generally shun everything related to death. “We want to provide family members with peace of mind and ensure that elderly people have no regrets in life,” said Xing Weidong, assistant to the general manager of Fu Shou Yuan in Shanghai. “Many young people in China are the only child in their family, so a young couple needs to take care of four elderly people. They might be at a loss as to what to do when their loved ones pass away. This is when we step in and help,” Xing said. Funeral planning is common in Western countries and has gained popularity in Japan in recent years. In Shanghai, Fu Shou Yuan offers three
funeral-planning packages priced at 6,800 yuan (940 euro), 12,800 yuan (1,760 euro) and 21,800 yuan (3,000 euro). People can pick everything from the burial clothing to cremation urns to flowers, but the purchase of cemetery plots is not included. Clients need to pay the service fees in a lump sum. The contract has no time limit, so people can plan decades in advance, and details can be updated as needed, Xing said. Earlier this year, the company started a pilot program in Hefei, Anhui province, and received more than 300 orders in eight months. About 80 percent of the orders have been for people between the ages of 65 and 70. Statistics show that more than 36 percent of Shanghai’s registered population will be 60 or older by 2020. Some elderly people like the service, because it can guarantee that they will receive the funeral they want, but others fear that dwelling on funeral arrangements will bring them bad luck, the China Daily reported.

New system for burying urns tried out in Shanghai

A new land-saving eco-friendly burial system that can put urns underground is being tried out at a cemetery in Shanghai’s Jinshan district and if successful will be expanded to other cemeteries the city that run out of land, the Shanghai Funeral and Interment Association said. Fuyouyuan, an 800-plus square meter interment site at Songyin Cemetery, can host 9,600 urns through the new approach. Each urn takes only about 0.028 square meter in the trial system, compared with the traditional space of up to 1 square meter. Cemetery manager Liu Jianrong said the system addresses the traditional belief that loved ones must be buried. “For Chinese, it is a deeply rooted belief that earth burial renders the souls of the deceased immortal,” He said. “This has hindered people from opting for burials at sea, placing ashes in columbaria and using urns made of biodegradable material.” Like many other cemeteries, Songyin Cemetery is running out of space and keeping on using the standard system means it would be full in about 20 years. The new burial option is expected to substantially prolong its operation. There are 48 columbaria, each containing 200 urns made of aluminum alloy and stainless steel that will not corrode for at least 50 years. The new-style columbaria are lowered into the ground in accordance with the deep-rooted Chinese belief that the deceased can only rest in peace underground. In total, 9,600 urns can be buried through this way in Songyin, equal to the total number of urns buried in the cemetery in the past 10 years. The new system is also much cheaper at about 12,800 yuan (1,760 euro) per urn, compared with the average 100,000 yuan (13,800 euro) for traditional interment. The trial has so far received a good public response.

Mortal mistake about mortality rates

Mortality rates in China are down, contrary to a recent Wall Street Journal report, leading Chinese experts said. In “Why Chinese men are dying,” dated February 24, the Journal reported that “mortality rates among Chinese men aged 41 to 60 have increased by 12 percent” over the decade through 2013. The report’s conclusion was based on incomplete data from China’s insurance regulator. The China Life Insurance Mortality Table (2010-13) was released this year, replacing the previous iteration that covered the 2000-03 period, which was dated and lacked breadth. The earlier table presented mortality rates in two insurance categories, non-annuity and annuity. The latest data set, however, presented rates in three categories, annuity I (mainly for term and whole life insurance), non-annuity II (mainly for endowment insurance) and annuity. Herein lies the problem. The Journal report appeared to only reference data from non-annuity I. At a glance, the mortality rate for men aged 50 who held non-annuity policies during the 2000-03 period was 0.36 percent. For the latter period, there are now two sets of data. The mortality rate for men aged 50 was 0.42 percent in the non-annuity I category, and 0.29 percent in the non-annuity II category. Thus, in response to whether a 50-year-old Chinese man is more likely to die in 2013 than a decade ago, the answer would be both yes and no – yes for those in category I, and no for those in category II. The Journal appeared to compare mortality rates from the new non-annuity I category to the broader non-annuity
data from 2003, thereby reaching its alarming conclusion. But the mortality rates in the annuity sections, including the rates for Chinese men aged 41 to 60, were consistently lower in 2013 compared to 2003, the China Daily reported.

THE LAST WORD

● Firefighters in central China had to use a pulley to lower the body of a construction worker killed in an accident outside the building he died in after its property management company and residents said using the lifts or stairs would be unlucky. The worker in his 50s fell 13 storeys after he lost his balance on his ladder while plastering the exterior of the building in Wuhan in Hubei province. But one blogger remarked that the building would be haunted as the victim would not rest in peace because of the residents’ lack of sensitivity.

● A DNA test has confirmed that the remains of a man found recently in a desert in Xinjiang belonged to Li Zhonghua, a native of Sichuan province, who went missing more than 50 years ago. Police said they do not know why Li perished in the desert, adding that he might have died around April 1961.

● A fight in a Dalian hospital over who would bury a patient on the brink of death ended with seven arrests, police said. The dying patient had been checked in to the Affiliated Zhongshan Hospital of Dalian University for only one hour before representatives from two funerary homes swooped in. Two men began arguing outside the emergency room where the terminal patient was being treated, leading to a brawl between the employees of the competing mortuaries.

FIXED GUIDELINES IN CASE OF DEATH

● Provide the complete name, date of birth and nationality of the deceased.

● Provide the name and telephone number of the person in China who first reported the death (hospital, public security bureau, embassy, travel agent, friend,...)

● Provide the place of death: district, city, prefecture and/or county and province.

● Indicate, if known, whether the deceased was covered by an insurance policy.

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PARTNER OF THE CHINA NATIONAL FUNERAL ASSOCIATION

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